

# Staying Whelmed

A Dialogical Reading of the Myth of the Internet,  
the Myth of America, and Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnival

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## Abstract

This thesis considers the construction of a myth of the Internet. Whilst as a society we are aware of many of the dangers and risks the Internet poses, we are seemingly incapable of or unwilling to make meaningful changes to the way we engage with it. This thesis places a myth of the Internet into a dialogue with a myth of America in order to posit that a narrative of the Internet as a social good and a tool of democratization works to stave off regulation, and that this occurs alongside an intense, neoliberal individualism that encourages us to understand the Internet as ‘good for me’, even as we understand it more broadly as ‘bad for society’. This narrative, this affective popular myth of the Internet, is then read through Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895 – 1975) carnival, which allows for an examination of the myth as a tool of both subversion and containment. The Bakhtinian carnival is ambiguous, a negotiation of power and change. The Internet reflects this ambiguity, although unlike the medieval carnival Bakhtin describes, the digital carnival has not come naturally to its end. The digital carnival continues, keeping us in a state of what can be described as “permanent liminality” (Szakolczai 2017); carnival behaviours escalate so as to not become stagnant, which results in a loss of control, existential anxiety, and conflict which becomes more serious and dangerous as the carnival continues.

*This work is dedicated to my parents,  
in recognition of their support, sacrifices, and encouragement.  
It technically counts as a grandchild.*

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## Setting the Scene

Lo.

This was the first word ever transmitted across the Internet. It was 1969, the year Nixon became President of the United States and Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon, the year of Woodstock and of the Stonewall riots. Amidst these kinds of cultural and political upheavals, the transmission of those two letters seems insignificant. They were not even a complete word; the computers in the trial crashed, and it was over an hour before they were able to complete the message with 'gin'. Yet those two letters proved that digital networking is possible. In its apparent serendipity, the incomplete message reflects a narrative of the Internet that is awe-inspiring and wonderful. Lo, the future is here. Lo, salvation is here. An auspicious moment, those two letters mark the birth of the Internet and a new way of thinking about the world.

Since 1969, the Internet has come to occupy a central place in Western society and increasingly in non-Western society too. It facilitates our economy, our news, and our connection to one another. Depending on the position one takes, either the Internet has helped our economy flourish, allows us to know instantly about things happening around the world, and brings us closer to friends and family that are spread across the globe; or, the Internet provides a way to exploit millions of people simultaneously, encourages news whose worth is based on its ability to rile people up, and creates silos in which we only experience those who think the same things we do. For better or worse, the Internet makes all of this possible.

In the face of this, we are now required to consider the Internet critically. Whether we like it or not, we have become dependent on the Internet. Often we use it without thinking. We skip past legal boilerplate when we sign up on websites; we have no idea who has made those websites or who owns them. This is all part of our Faustian bargain: we do not ask questions and we are granted access to a world of possibilities.

This thesis asks, what are we promised in return for our silence? If we give our lives over to the companies that dominate the Internet, what is in it for us? In short, salvation. The people who maintain a digital hegemony tell us that if we sacrifice to them, they will grant us salvation: from flesh, from oppression, from boredom. For the great majority, it is an attractive deal, particularly as the world goes from one global crisis to the next. This thesis is an examination of the terms and conditions of that deal, a reading of the fine print. What, exactly, are we agreeing to?

To explore these questions, I begin here by setting the boundaries of the discussion. The term 'Internet' is a varied and ambiguous term and so it is necessary to identify a nuanced understanding of how this term is used throughout the thesis. In connection to the term 'Internet', the thesis also considers a 'myth of the Internet'; both the concept of myth and of a specific myth of the Internet are discussed in this chapter. Following this, the conceptual framework of a hermeneutic dialogue is introduced; this framework guides the thesis and provides its structure.

In chapter one, I address the notion of a 'myth of America'. The myth of America provides context for the myth of the Internet; as a perceived American invention, I argue that the values of an idealised America inform and influence the values of an idealised Internet. When looking to defend their companies, Internet CEOs co-opt American values so as to make them less of a target for regulation by the United States government. As I explain throughout this thesis, by placing themselves as the successors to a myth of America, those who own and construct the largest Internet platforms defer criticism of the Internet by creating a narrative wherein to critique the Internet is to critique America itself.

In chapter two, I engage in a deep reading of the myth of the Internet. This chapter traces the imagined origins of the network and discusses how the traits established in these origins are used by today's Internet elite to protect themselves. The Internet elite create a narrative wherein they are our technological saviours, intent on creating a world that is better for us all. I also discuss



in this chapter the spatial conception of the Internet, and how this informs a digital immaterial capitalism which encourages the ongoing presence of the large Internet platforms in our lives.

In chapter three, I place the myth of the Internet into a dialogue with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 – 1975). Read through Bakhtin’s concept of carnival, the myth of the Internet can be understood as a tool of both subversion and containment wherein control is placed simultaneously with the Internet elite and with users. The myth of the Internet is a carnival that has not ended, however, and this creates undesirable consequences. Trapped in a perpetual carnival, life undergoes a “schismogenesis” (Bateson 1972, p. 68) where behaviours and actions necessarily escalate and life is underscored by existential anxiety and chaos. However, it is not wholly depressing, as, in its ambiguity and contingency, Bakhtin’s carnival suggests that there is always the possibility of an alternative.

### *A note on the title*

The title was the last piece of this thesis to fall into place. Surprisingly, it was also the first. *Staying Whelmed* was the title I had used for my PhD proposal in 2016 and, even though the thesis has evolved and changed significantly since then, the title still remains apt. To be ‘whelmed’ is to be neither overwhelmed nor underwhelmed<sup>1</sup>, a calm middle ground which I argue in this thesis we rarely get to experience. The Internet is both overwhelming and underwhelming, extreme and boring, and it seems inescapable. I do not, in this thesis, find the key to staying whelmed, if one even exists. What I offer is an imagining of the Internet that is ambiguous and inconclusive. In

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<sup>1</sup> The traditional definition of whelmed is to upturn something or to be overcome, a definition closely related to being ‘overwhelmed’. This definition has largely fallen out of favour in popular language, however, and my decision here to position ‘whelmed’ as a medium between being ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘underwhelmed’ is, like ‘underwhelmed’, a play on words. It is generally assumed that ‘underwhelmed’ arose as a joke in reference to ‘overwhelmed’ (Merriam-Webster n.d. a), and I use ‘whelmed’ in a similar way, which is not a novel use of the word; reporter for the Los Angeles Times, Michael Phillips, for instance, described leaving a performance in 2001 as neither overwhelmed or underwhelmed, simply whelmed (Merriam-Webster n.d. b).

this imagining, the potential for beingwhelmed exists and our experience of the Internet is negotiable.

On a personal level, the title is also symbolic of the thesis journey itself. Those who have been down this path will understand the rollercoaster experience of writing a thesis; it is years of being overwhelmed and underwhelmed. Coming back to my original title at the end of the journey feels like a fitting reminder to try and staywhelmed.

## The internet, or the Internet?

This thesis considers the Internet as an ideological structure as it exists within Western society. As an idea, the ‘Internet’ is distinct from the ‘internet’; in technical jargon, the internet is a set of digital technologies and protocols that inform the way information and data travel between various centralised, closed computer networks. A closed network may consist of a handful of connected computers, whereas the internet is an open connection that allows those closed networks to communicate with one another. The strength of the internet lies in its decentralised rhizomatic structure (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1988), which links various computer nodes in a vast web. Each time a user requests data, that request travels along the network lines until it reaches its destination, at which point the requested data is sent back to the user, though not necessarily taking the same route. In this way, the internet only comes into being when a data request is sent; there is no pre-existing structure as the internet routing protocols only create network lines when they are needed. This technical understanding contrasts with the colloquial understanding of the Internet. In the colloquial understanding, the Internet gets imagined as a permanent space that a user can ‘log onto’. It is an affective imagining of the Internet that exists within popular consciousness, connected to but not the same as the technical internet. This Internet is a digital world, distinct from the physical world but equally as real.

In a further conflation of terminology, the term Internet gets used more colloquially to refer to the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee's 1990 creation (Berners-Lee 1993). The World Wide Web can be conceptualised as a map, charting the different computer nodes and potential network lines. By knowing the location of specific nodes within the broader network, requests for data can be returned quicker as the index of locations is searchable and, in some cases, instantly knowable. The World Wide Web utilises hyperlink technology to create immediate connections, giving users a direct link to the nodes that can fulfil specific data requests. The World Wide Web does not map every node, however. Legal and moral judgments constrain the reach of the World Wide Web; however, not all network maps limit themselves in this way. Some maps allow access to network nodes that return requests for illegal material, such as information on acquiring illegal drugs, weapons, murder for hire, and child pornography. Each of these maps rarely overlaps, each granting access to specific nodes and connections. These network maps sit atop the internet, which exists as an architectural backbone broader than each map can access. They are *of* the internet, but they are not *the* internet.

In this thesis, the internet is of less importance than the Internet. The Internet is how we, in the everyday, conceptualise the vast communications network that in many ways defines our lives. It is how we make sense of something we may not have the technical skill to understand otherwise. The lived Internet exists as a space for the performance of identity and politics, something more than just the transmission of data. As an idea, the Internet has become more than the World Wide Web, expanding out to include a seemingly never-ending parade of apps that connect us to the immaterial digital world. However, the conceptualisation of the Internet as it exists within this thesis is a distinctly Western imagining that has colonised the world, at the same time as it eschews the Internet as it exists in places like China and North Korea, places in which access to the global internet is heavily regulated and censored by state governments (Chen et al.

2010)<sup>2</sup>. This is not to suggest that a Western Internet does not have consequences for non-Western countries: for instance, Facebook's six-hour outage in early October, 2021, caused global disruptions, leaving small businesses from Ireland to Brazil unable to operate, and humanitarian aid workers in Syria unable to access the main channel of communication they use to warn each other about impending bomb strikes (Asher-Schapiro & Teixeira 2021; Isaac & Frenkel 2021). It remains, however, that non-Western and non-American governments are capable of presenting competing narratives of the Internet, such as India's recent assertions that American Internet companies are harming the country and thus so-called hostage taking laws<sup>3</sup> are necessary to ensure that the American companies are unable to disregard local law with no consequences (Elliott 2021; Newton 2021b).

Thus, we can consider this conceptualisation of the Internet to be a contingent narrative, reliant on a specific place, time, and people. The dominant narrative of the Internet is constructed by many of the same people who have built the technology of the internet, and it has been repeated and reinforced by many others, including political officials. It is a complex, contradictory narrative that often belies the lived reality and experiences of the people who access the network. Exactly what I mean when referring to the Internet is ultimately a question to which this entire thesis is an answer.

So this is a thesis about the Internet, but it is also a thesis about narrative and meaning-making. This means that it is actually a thesis which, at its core, is about myth-making. The colloquial understanding of the term 'Internet' is the construction of a myth of the Internet; it is

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<sup>2</sup> There exists between China and the Western internet a 'Great Firewall', a digital barrier intended to keep out things that the Chinese government deems unacceptable. North Korea takes internet censorship further still, restricting citizens to the *Kwangmyong*, a closed network that hosts information websites, an email system, and a social networking service. North Korean citizens are entirely denied access to the Western internet, though some government officials and foreigners are permitted restricted access, emphasising the role of geopolitics in the Internet narrative (Chen, Ko & Lee 2010).

<sup>3</sup> These laws compel global companies to have a local point of contact, someone who, if the government believes it necessary, can be arrested and held responsible for company transgressions.

an ideological narrative that can be understood within a Gramscian notion of ideology, where ideology is understood as a tool of power wielded within a hegemonic cultural framework (Gramsci 1985, 1988). The myth of the Internet is the ideology of the Internet elite, used to both legitimate and placate, encouraging users of their platforms and products to consent to their hegemonic rule. The myth of the Internet is the self-defence of men like Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, and Sundar Pichai, CEO of Alphabet. They claim they do not force or coerce anybody to use Facebook or Google, Instagram or YouTube. Participation is a choice, and according to these men, it is a choice that we make freely. I argue that to consider the claims made by Zuckerberg, Pichai, and others like them, as mythological narratives rather than to just take them at face value creates a space to examine, critique, and challenge the power structures that support the Internet.

Throughout this thesis, I critically examine the myth of the Internet. In doing so, I discuss what I identify as three discernible ideological periods wherein the myth of the Internet changes paradigmatically in line with the social context. Such shifts are to be expected, although within the broader myth they go unacknowledged, ignored in favour of the stability and validation provided by a single, linear, cohesive narrative. The singular narrative is an expression of a technological determinism, a myth that defies question as it is purported to be a natural and normal part of human social evolution. It becomes a social fact which, per Emile Durkheim (1895/1982), is a way of

acting, thinking, and feeling external to the individual, which [is] invested with a coercive power by virtue of which [it] exercise[s] control over [the individual]. Consequently, since [it] consist[s] of representations and actions, [it] cannot be confused with organic phenomena, nor with psychical phenomena, which have no existence save in and through the individual consciousness. (1895/1982, p. 52)

The myth is at once a narrative constructed as a tool of power and something which has become an agent in itself, capable of influencing our thoughts and behaviours. I argue that this myth is

essentialised within the colloquial use of the term Internet and is central to our relationship with and understanding of this technology of connection.

The examination of the myth of the Internet I present in this thesis should itself be understood in context. When I started this thesis in 2016, I knew I wanted to write about the Internet. While I had not, exactly, grown up with it, I did have access to a dial-up connection on a shared home computer when I was in high school. As I was living in a small town in a small country so far away from everywhere else, the internet acted as an essential access point to the world. I was, and still am, fascinated by how quickly the internet has become ubiquitous; not being able to connect has very quickly become unusual and is rapidly being seen as an indication of social deprivation (Hick 2006; InternetNZ 2020; Norris 2001; Straubhaar et al. 2012)<sup>4</sup>. Back in 2016, I envisioned a critique of the Internet and how we use it; I was concerned, in particular, about the effect that the Internet has on the people in society who have less actionable agency and thus less ability to opt-out of using it. Authors such as Astra Taylor (2014) and Douglas Rushkoff (2016) were particularly inspiring as they were critically unpicking how the Internet is changing our society and shining a light on the mechanisms and processes that keep the Internet behemoth operating. However, since 2016 there has been a shift in how society publicly discusses the Internet and the handful of companies that have come to define it. After the election of Donald Trump as the United States' 45<sup>th</sup> President and the allegations of Russian hackers interfering in that election process, there has been widespread disenchantment in our relationship to the Internet. This disenchantment has escalated to the point where we are now charging Internet companies with acting as breeding grounds for election interference, privacy and human rights violations, and the

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<sup>4</sup> This has only been further highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic; requiring school children to remain at home and learn remotely intensifies the divide between those who can afford access to the Internet and those who cannot. The full effects of this period of remote learning will not be known for some time, however it is not difficult to imagine that there will be a noticeable difference in the educational abilities of children who had easy access to the Internet and those who did not.

rise of powerful and highly-motivated hate groups. Suddenly, the shine of the Internet had worn off, and the critique I had been constructing had become common sense. People are acutely aware of the effect their internet usage is having on their mental health, to the point where ‘digital detoxing’ has become mainstream and logging off is seen as an indication of moral superiority. CEOs of Internet companies have been dragged before government committees (Facebook Inc. 2018b; Owen 2018). Hashtags urge us to delete our various social media accounts. Despite being a major Internet company itself, Netflix unironically hosts denunciatory documentaries, such as *The Great Hack* (Noujaim & Amer 2019) and *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski 2020). Scathing exposes are published by former industry insiders denouncing the Frat Bro culture permeating the Internet industry (Chang 2018; Wiener 2020). With this broad social shift, my interest has also shifted. A cutting critique of the Internet and Internet companies is being undertaken from a multitude of angles and a diverse range of people, and anything that I could add would be more of the same. What intrigues me now is that, despite this widespread rise in critique, the way we use the Internet has not massively changed over the last decade or so. Central Internet platforms such as Google and Amazon have maintained their dominance, pushing themselves further towards a monopoly position as they price out and buy out potential competitors<sup>5</sup>. Social media such as Facebook remains an important fixture in social life. We readily and, increasingly, knowingly hand over our data in return for free connectivity to our social networks. We know that social media can be detrimental, as advice on repairing the damage social media does to our mental health circulates via social media as an ironic, unending loop of self-sabotage. Beyond our control, government departments rely on Internet companies to provide the architecture, storage space, and analytic

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<sup>5</sup> Amazon infamously pushed down the prices of diapers in 2009 after Quidsi Inc., owners of *diapers.com*, refused to be bought out. Emails from the time have since surfaced indicating that Amazon was willing to push prices so low that they themselves would lose as much as \$200 million USD in order to push *diapers.com* out of business (Day 2020). By November 2010, Amazon had sufficiently decimated Quidsi Inc.’s ability to do business and had acquired them in a buy-out (Oremus 2013).

tools to maintain their websites. When phoning a government service, it is not uncommon to be greeted by an automated voice message listing all the services that would be easier to complete through the Internet, pushing us to use digital platforms rather than to speak to a human operator<sup>6</sup>. Politicians hit out at social media whilst admitting that they cannot leave it, as it grows increasingly more integral for connecting with voter bases<sup>7</sup>. We are more vocal about our disdain for what the Internet is doing to us, yet we are no less likely to continue to use it, and this is now what intrigues me. We are not the metaphorical cultural dope tricked into using the Internet and these services without any idea of the consequences; we make the conscious decision that the pros of using the Internet outweigh the cons of disconnection.

Of course, that is not to say that we make that decision freely, as the purveyors of the myth of the Internet would prefer us to believe. We decide to participate whilst situated within a hegemonic cultural system that continuously pushes the ideas of freedom and agency onto us. As I show throughout this thesis, the positioning of the Internet as a tool for economic growth has created a crisis of size that leaves us nihilistic about the potential for change; by relying on the Internet and associated technologies to buoy up failing economic structures, we have allowed the Internet to grow into a behemoth that appears immovable, and it continues to grow as we continue to turn away from meaningfully challenging it. This thesis is not entirely pessimistic, however. I argue that by allowing the Internet to become the hegemonic power it is today, we have opened a space for that power to be confronted. The Internet has become, for many of us, the everyday. It is no longer only the domain of the technically proficient, the mystical realm of the stereotypical nerd. It is no longer a strange and curious technology where we need to contact website service

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<sup>6</sup> The New Zealand student loan StudyLink service line, for instance, encourages callers multiple times to use the MyStudyLink platform to do common tasks, such as declaring income, checking eligibility, and checking application status, rather than waiting in a queue to speak to an operator.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Vance's (2020) discussion on why New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern will not delete her Facebook account despite her lead role in the so-called Christchurch Call (<<https://www.christchurchcall.com/>> [viewed 18/06/2019]).



lines to ask how to scroll down a page (Ryan 2011). The Internet has been mundanised, and it is here that I turn to the Russian scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin. In his work, Bakhtin discusses the concept of carnival, a time in the medieval social calendar where life would be flipped on its head; the fool would become the king, the peasant and the nobleman would eat at the same table. I argue that in allowing for the normalisation of the Internet into everyday life, we have allowed the inversion of the everyday to become the everyday. The Internet no longer represents a suspension of normal life; it *is* normal life. If we understand the Internet in this way, however, we expose its contingency and the contingency of the hegemony that relies upon it. There is, in our nihilistic engagement with the Internet, a path towards change.

In the pages that follow, I unpack what I mean by this phrase, the myth of the Internet. I begin by discussing the term ‘myth’ itself, drawing on the work of Roland Barthes (1957/2012) to define myth as a type of speech, as ideas and values that are naturalised within certain social discourses. I next turn to applying this idea of myth to the Internet, sketching an outline of this myth using what Marc Weber has termed “interpretative phases” (2016, p. 55) as a reference. Finally, I consider the work of Martin Heidegger (1954/1977) and argue that his conception of the essence of modern technology can enrich our understanding of our relationship to digital technology and how we participate in constructing the myth of the Internet. This entire thesis identifies and analyses this myth; in the chapters that follow, I trace the myth as it currently stands, examining why particular histories are kept within the myth and others discarded.

## Myth, a conceptual tool

The colloquial use of the term ‘myth’ is often intended derisively, meant to indicate that something is false or fictional, a made-up story. It is also often used in reference to the religious or spiritual narratives of peoples long dead, stories of pagan deities intended to explain the world

in a time before science and logic. Myth, in this sense, is a label determined by content. By speaking of the myth of the Internet, I do not intend to refer to a false or fantastical narrative. I instead refer to a functional definition of myth, where content is placed in deference to purpose. As I discuss in this section, in this definition, the content of a myth is dependent on context and historical moment. In contrast, the purpose of myth remains largely stable, working to bind and delineate social collectives. As Barthes (1957/2012, p. 217) comments, “since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth.” Whilst this creates a somewhat metaphysical definition of myth, it is important to acknowledge here that the use of the term myth in this thesis is as a conceptual tool rather than an attempt to posit a universal and ahistorical definition.

Barthes’ (1957/2012) conception of myth is integral to this thesis. He describes myth as that which exists as an ideological narrative, a particular telling of events that guide and shape particular ways of understanding the world; “less reality than a certain knowledge of reality” (1957/2012, p. 228). Whilst myths in this way may be fictional, they are not necessarily straight-out lies. They are the careful telling and re-telling of narratives that are intended to emphasise specific ideas over others, such as war narratives that highlight the contribution of men and diminish the contribution of women: the emphasis given to the contribution of men in front line positions often vastly overshadows the emphasis given to the contribution of women in intelligence and pilot positions. This narrative deliberately articulates war as a masculine undertaking (Ansley 2018). Barthes (1957/2012, p. 254) argues that myth is used in this way to give “a historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal.” In this example, the focus on men during war works to normalise war as masculine, turning the heteronormative understanding of women as soft and non-violent from a specific historical discourse into what Barthes (1957/2012, p. 270) labels “common sense.” Myth is thus a tool of power, grounded in historical circumstance whilst claiming to be set aside from it; the successful

myth is normalised, a *psuedophysis*<sup>8</sup> that depoliticises speech by making it seem as though it is eternally justifiable and non-contingent.

As a conceptual tool, a functional definition of myth is extremely useful. Whilst it may be unable to assist us in determining the real and the natural, myth assists us in understanding the way social groups construct their social worlds. In producing a functional definition of myth, Ernst Cassirer rejects the idea that there is speech that can authentically depict reality, instead arguing that speech is what actually constructs reality:

The sound of *speech* strives to ‘express’ subjective and objective happening, the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ world; but what of this it can retain is not the life and individual fullness of existence, but only a dead abbreviation of it. All that ‘denotation’ to which the spoken word lays claim is really nothing more than mere suggestion; a ‘suggestion’ which, in face of the concrete variegation and totality of actual experience, must always appear a poor and empty shell. [...] Instead of measuring the content, meaning, and truth of intellectual forms by something extraneous which is supposed to be reproduced in them, we must find in these forms themselves the measure and criterion for their truth and intrinsic meaning. [...] From this point of view, myth, art, language and science appear as symbols; not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own. [...] Thus the special symbolic forms are not imitations, but *organs* of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us. (1946a, pp. 7 - 8, emphasis in original)

Here Cassirer suggests that instead of searching for the objective reality to which our speech corresponds, we should focus on the subjective reality that our speech creates. Our subjective interpretation of symbolic forms necessarily frames our understanding of reality. We are unable to

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<sup>8</sup> A fake or imitation of the natural.

comprehend an objective or external reality, so it is as if it does not actually exist. Through the construction of reality, Cassirer (1946b) argues that by giving voice to myths, we constitute ourselves within social collectives, as myth works to bind us to those who are like us whilst simultaneously distinguishing us from those who are not. He explains myth as a process of social-emotional objectification, where we use myth to express our collective questions about the world we find ourselves in; there are those who share our questions and thus our myths, and there are those who do not.

This idea of myth as a tool to construct and reinforce social barriers is picked up by Bruce Lincoln (1989). Lincoln argues that the construction of identity and social collectives is an ongoing, continual process and that with each telling of a myth we re-become a member of that collective. Our myths constitute our identities, in other words, not only by first establishing them but by continually re-establishing them. We are not simply defined by our myths but are instead “literally *called into being*” by them (Lincoln 1989, p. 19, emphasis in original). National myths are a clear example of this process. For example, in New Zealand, the Anzac and Gallipoli myths are central to the national identity (Light 2021); with their re-telling every 25th of April, New Zealand is re-created as a nation, the citizenry bound together in solidarity and in opposition to outside forces<sup>9</sup>. Through the act of remembering and worshipping the New Zealand soldiers that died on the beaches of Gallipoli in 1915, New Zealand “reflects, encodes, re-presents, [and] helps replicate the *established structures*” (Lincoln 1989, p. 7, emphasis in original) of the society (Bell 2012). The country is reminded of its deep connection to Britain, as it was on Britain’s orders that the New Zealand soldiers invaded the Ottoman Empire at Gallipoli. New Zealanders are also reminded of the rupture of that connection, where Britain’s mishandling of the situation led to the devastation of

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<sup>9</sup> The ANZAC myth is equally prominent in the Australian national mythology, however it is interpreted differently. The Australian interpretation largely ignores New Zealand’s contribution, whereas the New Zealand interpretation acknowledges the relationship between the two countries.

the New Zealand forces and left New Zealanders jaded and eager to forge a path separate from the British colonial empire (Hwang 2017). The commemorative Anzac Day services serve to call into being the New Zealand identity. This myth is particularly constitutive for New Zealanders living abroad; whilst they may live elsewhere, participation in Anzac day services provides a space to become a New Zealander once more, distinct from the identity that they have crafted within their new country; they become for those brief hours a New Zealander, rather than simply someone from New Zealand.

Integral to this interpretation of myth is what Lincoln (1989) calls authority. In describing the difference between fables, legends, history, and myths, Lincoln develops a classification system that consists of three criteria: truth-claims, credibility, and authority. Fables meet none of these criteria; they are tales that do not claim to be true and thus have no credibility or authority. Legends claim to offer factual accounts of past events; however, they are typically dismissed as false, and therefore also lacking credibility and authority. History makes a claim to truth and is typically understood to be credible representations of past events. According to Lincoln, history is merely factual recollection. It does not place continuing demands on the present, thus lacks authority. Myths, on the other hand, meet all of the criteria. Like history, myths claim a connection to past events and are typically considered to provide accurate depictions of those events. Where they differ is that they also claim authority, “[exerting] continuing demands and obligations on actors in the present moment” (Lincoln 1989, p. 28). Through this notion of authority and obligation, particular social forms get continuously reproduced and legitimated. The Anzac myth works in this way, existing as a representation of typically agreed upon historical events and calling on those in the present to remember, reflect, and define themselves as New Zealanders (Light 2021)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The Gallipoli exhibit at New Zealand’s national museum, Te Papa Tongarewa, is one way this reflection occurs. This exhibit opened in April 2015 and was originally scheduled to close in 2019; its popularity has seen its stay extended until at least April 2022 (Te Papa Tongarewa 2019).

History is the narrative of New Zealand soldiers dying on Turkish beaches; myth is the belief that we are responsible and accountable to that. Myths in this way determine our social norms, providing a framework within which we can interpret our relationship to one another. It “[preserves] ... as an image” (Barthes 1957/2012, p. 259) a historical narrative that in its interpretation is socially determined but is presented as though it is not. The interpretation of the historical narrative will change; the myth is adaptive and will emphasise different things depending on the narrator and the context of its telling. However, the overall sense of the myth will be oblivious to these changes, absorbing them as if they had always been there. Myths are thus considered within this thesis as normalised speech and naturalised beliefs, common sense narratives that are presented as though they are eternal, and eternally justified.

## The Myth of the Internet

Using the above definition of myth, I argue that there exists a myth of the Internet. The content of this myth is fluid, changing, and responsive to historical context. However, the overall narrative is naturalised and taken for granted, used to construct and re-construct a digital hegemony. As Adrian Daub has said,

the tech industry holds [sway] over our collective imagination: they do not simply reflect our experience, they frame how we experience it in the first place. They sweep aside certain parts of the status quo, and leave other parts mysteriously untouched. (2020a)

The myth that the Internet industry constructs is selective and claims a singular history, amplifying certain events and figures at the expense of others. This history is a history of white men, as women and those of colour are rarely permitted to feature. Importantly, it is also an American history, constructed on the framework of a mythological America<sup>11</sup>. As Marc Weber (2016) points out,

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<sup>11</sup> I return to this idea of a mythological America in chapter one.

however, the actual history of the Internet is more complex and varied than the myth would suggest, though it is rarely, if ever, held in its totality. Weber argues that instead of a complete understanding of this actual history, “the histories both of computing and of the online world have gone through interpretive phases” (2016, p. 55). Whilst these interpretive phases are socially and historically specific, “for many casual observers, as well as some scholars [...] the ARPAnet<sup>12</sup> and selected aspects of the Web came to stand for the field as a whole” (Weber 2016, p. 55). What Weber identifies is the foundation of what I call the myth of the Internet. This myth goes through interpretive phases whilst pretending that it does not, instead masquerading as a true and objective history of the Internet. I do not mean to claim here that there is an actual true and objective history of the Internet and that we simply need to set aside the myth to find it. Any history of the internet is, in its way, a myth. The focus for this thesis, however, is the common myth at which Weber hints. It is a popular myth that begins with the ARPAnet and moves forward through the invention of the World Wide Web, the Mosaic browser. Eventually, it culminates in the Internet as we understand it today, channelled through companies such as Alphabet and Amazon and Facebook.

The interpretive phases of the myth of the Internet are not sharply defined temporal periods within a singular trajectory. They overlap and are held more firmly in some social circles over others. For ease of discussion, however, I identify three main interpretive phases: the Engineering phase, the Libertarian phase, and the Humanist phase. Even though each phase understands the Internet differently, I argue that the myth of the Internet assimilates each phase into a single historical narrative, dismissing the nuances of each historical context to ensure the narrative is logical, linear, unchallenged, and unchallengeable. It is important to note here that

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<sup>12</sup> ARPA is an acronym of the United States Advanced Research Projects Agency. This agency was created in 1958. The name of the agency changed in 1972 to Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), changing back to ARPA in 1993, before changing again to DARPA in 1996. Throughout this thesis I use the name ARPA to emphasise the age of the ARPAnet, and also to emphasise the way the myth of the Internet is constructed so as to avoid acknowledging its Department of Defense connections. This disassociation regarding the Department of Defense is discussed in chapter two.

when I discuss the myth of the Internet, I do so from its latest incarnation, which I identify as the Humanist phase. My framing of the Engineering and Libertarian phases is thus in reference to this latest phase. As a myth constructed in the public sphere, those who exist as the current digital hegemony attempt to ensure that the myth is the only historical narrative told and so “genuine” understandings of the historical narrative as it existed during these previous two phases are near impossible. Whilst it is possible to locate first-person accounts, both historic and contemporary, of how the Internet was imagined in earlier periods, these accounts will still be unavoidably filtered through the lens of the present. As a researcher, I cannot extract myself from my own social and historical context. Therefore my analysis of the Engineering and Libertarian phases will necessarily be done *through* the lens of the Humanist phase.

### ***The Engineering Phase***

The Engineering phase of the myth of the Internet is steeped in a technical mindset, or, as Ali Ansari terms it, “technothink” (2001, p. 113). Technothink is characterised by an attitude that approaches the world as a mechanical problem to be solved through the application of technology. At its conception, supporters of the Internet presented digital networking as a tool that could advance science and research (Ryan 2011). These beliefs were buoyed by the post-World War II economic boom in the United States and the technological advances that had facilitated the defeat of the Axis powers. The contribution that technology had made in the Allies’ success in the war encouraged the United States government to provide blue skies funding for science and technology researchers to pursue any project that could maintain the nation’s economic and political dominance. For J. C. R. Licklider (1963), considered by many to be one of the fathers of the internet, this meant creating a system whereby researchers could borrow programs and data sets from each other. Connecting various computers in a network would put less strain on the power of any one user’s machine and save researchers from having to recreate a program that someone



else had already made. In turn, this would save them time that they could spend finding solutions to both scientific and military problems. The Engineering phase is thus orientated towards the future and using technology to move into that future. The Engineering phase is complicit in a particular American patriotism that ideas of technological superiority and scientific progress make legitimate; in this history of the Internet, American global domination both enables and is enabled by the prospect of digital networking.

### ***The Libertarian Phase***

The economic advantages enjoyed by a post-World War II United States did not last. With the economic downturn came a change in the myth of the Internet. The focus shifted from understanding the Internet as a tool to build a utopia to the Internet as a site of ideological opposition. This Libertarian phase is epitomized by John Perry Barlow's (1996) *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. This text declared the Internet as a digital frontier, a world removed from the industrial society of the everyday. Assisted by advances in personal computing, the Internet became individualised, occupied not by scientific and military researchers but computer-literate individuals shucking off traditional forms of social organisation to build a space where ideas, rather than personal circumstances, were the preferred form of currency. The so-called Digerati – “people highly skilled in the processing and manipulation of digital information; wealthy or scholarly techno-nerds,” according to ex-*New York Times* editor Tim Race (quoted in Metcalf 2004, p. 12) – responded to the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s with gusto, recasting the Internet as an anti-government oasis. Individuals such as Steward Brand, the founder of the Whole Earth Catalogue magazine and co-founder of one of the earliest online communities, the WELL, and Paul Saffo, a highly regarded technology forecaster and, in 1997, one of the World Economic Forum's ‘Global Leaders for Tomorrow’, believed that the Internet was a “major social event” (Brand, interviewed by Brockman 1996, p. 24) and that it allowed users to “overcome the tyranny

of geography” (Saffo 1990). For these people, the Internet was new terrain, allowing for new ways to exist. This belief in the potentialities of the Internet spread throughout society; the late David Bowie was particularly enthusiastic about the Internet, and he claimed that it allowed for “a new demystification process [to occur] between the artist and the audience” (quoted in BBC Newsnight 2016), democratising the creation of culture.

The convergence of libertarianism and neoliberal capitalism solidified the belief that early attempts at imposing regulations on the Internet were impeding the civil liberties of American citizens. Regulations and policies were understood as paternalistic attempts to constrain the burgeoning Internet economy and the potential fortunes that stood to be made. The strength of this idea was not limited to the Digerati, however. For instance, in 1997, United States president Bill Clinton wrote that “unnecessary regulation could cripple the growth and diversity of the Internet” and that his administration was in full support of industry self-regulation (Clinton & Gore 1997)<sup>13</sup>. In the same year, the United States Supreme Court upheld a district court ruling that the *Communications Decency Act of 1996*, intended to protect minors from adult content on the Internet, was unconstitutional. The ruling argued that the Act “suppresses a large amount of speech that adults have a constitutional right to receive and to address to one another” (*Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union* 1997, p. 874). The government itself, it appeared, supported Barlow’s rejection of government interference in the Internet. The Court’s ruling is an indication of the influence of laissez-faire economic policies and what information and communications professor Dan Schiller (1999) regards as a form of government-directed American imperialism. Schiller points to the rapid pace of technological development and argues that government deregulation allowed American companies to develop quickly the tools necessary to gain control over emerging

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<sup>13</sup> Al Gore, Clinton’s vice-president, has been tipped as “the first political leader to recognize the importance of the Internet and to promote and support its development” (Kahn & Cerf 2000). As a congressman, senator, and vice-president, Gore showed consistent support for the Internet and believed in its revolutionary potential.

global flows of information. The patriotism of the Engineering phase was still present, but it had changed; it was patriotism of an idealized America, one constructed on an imagined historical land that had somehow been twisted and tarnished by the government. Where the Engineering phase existed in reference to the future, the Libertarian phase existed in reference to an imagined past. The idea that the Internet would make the world a better place remained however, acting as a uniting thread that links the Engineers and the Libertarians in a singular trajectory.

### *The Humanist<sup>14</sup> Phase*

The Dot Com Boom<sup>15</sup> of the 1990s validated the Libertarian phase. It was then subsequently invalidated by the subsequent Dot Com Crash<sup>16</sup> of the 2000s. Humbled by the Crash, the Libertarian phase gave way to the Humanist phase. In this phase, the Internet has become more global; the commercialisation of the Internet that occurred just before the Boom has extended access beyond researchers and hobbyists to a more generalised population. Those with the technical skills combine the neoliberal capitalism of the Libertarians with the utopian vision of the Engineers. This ideological approach enables them to seek maximum profit through continued global expansion whilst still championing the positive possibilities of the Internet; the two, profit and betterment, are intertwined for the Humanists. The Humanists look beyond the United States, turning the values of a mythological America that the Engineers and Libertarians believed in into

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<sup>14</sup> The term ‘humanist’ here is, like the myth of the Internet more broadly, a fuzzy, indistinct understanding of traditional humanism. It is linked to enlightenment values through a popular lens; it has connotations of universality, of social good, of being of benefit for all humankind. It is part of what Raymond Williams’ terms a ‘structure of feeling’ – which I discuss further in chapter one – where interpretation is both collective and individual, simplified down to broad concepts determined by affect. A humanist phase of the myth of the Internet is thus a phase imbued with feel-good notions of human decency and collective social progress, intended to convey benevolence and dissuade critique.

<sup>15</sup> The Dot Com Boom was a period at the end of the 1990s in which the stocks of Internet companies experienced massive and rapid growth.

<sup>16</sup> The Dot Com Crash was the result of the Dot Com Boom. Stocks associated with Internet companies plummeted which devastated the market. The Crash was largely the consequence of the over-valuation of companies and the inability of those companies to become profitable.

global values. The express goal is not simply to ensure the United States' continued dominance but to make the entire world better. Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, in a letter included as part of Facebook's 2012 S-1 form<sup>17</sup>, acknowledged that whilst "Facebook was not originally created to be a company" and that Facebook is uniquely positioned "to give everyone a voice and to help transform society for the future," it is important also to note that "most great people care primarily about building and being a part of great things, but they also want to make money" (Facebook Inc. 2012, pp. 67 - 68). This capitalist impulse is downplayed within the myth of the Internet as necessary for progress. Zuckerberg claims in his letter that being financially attractive to investors will enable the company to "keep attracting the best people and building more great services" (Facebook Inc. 2012, p. 69), allowing the company to further its mission of an open and connected world.

The Humanist phase of the Internet represents a marriage of neoliberal capitalism and technological utopianism. In this phase, profit and a better world are deeply connected. This ideology was cemented in the myth of the Internet when the stock market fell and plunged the world into a recession in 2008. Amidst a crisis of out-of-control debt, the Internet became something of a lifeline for businesses that had been hit hard; the Internet allowed for the development of tools that could track and target users, creating an ideal environment for marketing and advertising. Internet companies that were able to command control of user information stood to gain from the recession; in 2009 in the United States, Internet advertising was the only media sector to see a growth in advertising, up 7.3 per cent whilst advertising overall fell 12.3 per cent (TechCrunch 2010)<sup>18</sup>. For those digital companies that were able to command the most extensive

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<sup>17</sup> An S-1 form is an investment prospectus that the United States Securities and Exchange Commission requires companies that are intending to go public to file. It provides financial information so as to help potential investors make informed decisions, particularly around the company's revenue and income, and information as to the types of stock that will be made for sale. Facebook filed its form ahead of its 2012 Initial Public Offering.

<sup>18</sup> 2009 was also a good year for Internet advertising in the United Kingdom, with Internet advertising overtaking television to become the biggest advertising sector, making £1.75 billion pounds (Sweeney, 2009).

data sets, advertising dollars were immense. The Interactive Advertising Bureau reports that out of the \$22.7 billion USD spent on Internet advertising in 2009, 71 per cent of it went to just ten companies, with 89 per cent going to just fifty companies (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010). The importance of advertising dollars to Internet companies cannot be underestimated; in 2009, 96.8 per cent of Google's \$23 billion USD revenue came from advertising (Google Inc. 2009), and 98.3 per cent of Facebook's \$777 million USD revenue came from advertising (Facebook Inc. 2012). In 2018, 85.4 per cent of Google's \$136 billion USD revenue was from advertising<sup>19</sup> (Alphabet Inc. 2018a), and Forbes magazine listed it as the world's second most valuable brand (Badenhausen 2018). In the same year, 98.5 per cent of Facebook's \$55 billion USD revenue was from advertising (Facebook Inc. 2018a), and Forbes listed it as the world's fourth most valuable brand (Badenhausen 2018). Both companies have thrived post-recession, thanks partly to the increase in the portion of advertising dollars that the Internet claimed. Google's profit in 2018 was 371.4 per cent higher than profit a year into the recession in 2009, which in turn was 55.1 per cent higher than pre-recession profit levels in 2007 (Alphabet Inc. 2018a; Google Inc. 2009). Facebook's 2018 profit was a staggering 9555.9 per cent higher than profit in 2009, which in turn was 265.9 per cent higher than pre-recession profit levels in 2007 (Facebook Inc. 2012, 2018a)<sup>20</sup>.

The continual profit growth that companies such as Google and Facebook are producing works to legitimate the Humanist ideology that their founders and CEOs espouse. The ability of these companies to weather an economic storm gets interpreted as a sign of providence; by thriving during crises, the Internet becomes a symbol of economic stability and the correct path forward. A technologically determinist belief that the Internet and digital capitalism are the future, a belief also held by the Engineers and the Libertarians, has been reinforced by the 2008 global recession

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<sup>19</sup> This percentage is specific to the Google segment of parent company Alphabet's overall revenue.

<sup>20</sup> Part of this increase will be attributed to the normal growth a platform can be expected to see over its first few years, however these numbers are extraordinarily high.

and further supported by the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence of this belief arises when marketing researchers frequently claim that effective control over customer and user data is vital for businesses; they argue that being able to understand this data allows companies to create efficient marketing campaigns and to predict potential customer behaviour, thus ensuring a successful business model (Elgendy & Elragal 2014; Ohlhorst 2012; Ularu et al. 2012). The perceived need for the tools necessary to collect and interpret this data is not small. Amazon Web Services, for instance, provides extensive data-tracking and analytic tools to its customers, of which Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos claimed in 2015 there were over one million of, “across nearly every industry” (Amazon.com Inc. 2016), including McDonald’s, Time Inc., and GE, and which in 2018 counted for a significant 58.7 per cent of Amazon’s annual profit (Amazon.com Inc. 2018). Through their participation, companies exhibit and reinforce a belief in the importance of digital data sets. As a result, Internet companies that demonstrate the skill and technical proficiency necessary to provide access to customers’ movements, attitudes, and intentions are considered to be among the world’s most valuable companies (Badenhausen 2018). Alongside a lack of substantial regulation, the ideological buy-in to the Humanist interpretation of the Internet makes these companies attractive to the investors who provide the capital for these companies to become behemoths. Internet companies, in turn, secure their dominance by commanding the digital landscape with their substantial wealth and investment power to buy out competitors before they can grow into real threats. The analytically savvy digital companies have established a digital oligopoly, whose “control over vast digital domains has been primarily achieved through their extraordinary market power and financial strength, but also through their intellectual and industrial property rights that complement and reinforce each other” (Smyrnaio 2018, p. 4). These Internet companies create a hermetically sealed social context where the dominant myth of the Internet is often the only one.

These three interpretive phases represent different incarnations of the myth of the Internet. Whilst each subsequent phase draws on the ideas and narratives of the previous, it also

discards that which it does not want; by the Humanist phase, for example, the role of the United States government in constructing the Internet is largely ignored. By attending to each of these phases in turn throughout this thesis, I highlight the changes that occur across what is today presented as a static narrative. These changes represent our evolving relationship with the Internet. While I present these phases as chronological, it is important to note that they are not; they exist at once, as different versions of the myth told by different people. Presenting them chronologically as I do in this thesis is in part for ease of discussion and in part to identify the dominant hegemonic myth of the moment.

## The Question Concerning the Internet?

I want here to turn to the observations that Martin Heidegger (1954/1977) made concerning technology. Despite never having experienced the internet himself, Heidegger's conclusions resonate with this notion of a myth of the Internet, providing a starting point from which to consider our current relationship with the Internet. His work provides insight into how technologies construct particular ways of understanding the world and how that can lead us to embrace the myth of the Internet within our relationship to digital technology.

Heidegger himself was not interested in particular technologies, but in technology as a system and a way of thinking. He challenges what he sees to be the typical understanding of technology as a set of neutral tools that are entirely subject to human whims, instead arguing that they are objects that simultaneously we shape and that shape us in turn. Heidegger's work is particularly illuminating for this thesis, as he comes to the conclusion that there is a specific way of understanding the world that accompanies technology; technology makes us more technical, more likely to consider the world as binaristic and solvable. It is clear that we have assimilated this way of understanding, as it appears in our language: we see people as being "hardwired" to think in particular ways, we "code" and "decode" behaviour, we give each other "feedback." These are

examples of some of the technological metaphors we use to understand non-technological things (Barglow 1994). This technical way of understanding is, of course, not a recent phenomenon; we can turn back to René Descartes (1596 – 1650) and his explanation of the body as a machine distinct from the divine mind. However, Heidegger (1977) emphasises that we do not just understand the world as technological or mechanical, but that because of this understanding, we seek to put the world to use, treating it in much the same way that we treat technology when we consider it a mere tool. Technology creates a frame of mind which believes that what is available must be put to use; we have the technology to turn the water in the Rhine into power, for example, and thus we must do so. As Jacques Soustelle said in 1960 of the atomic bomb, “since it was possible, it was necessary” (cited in Ellul 1954/1964, p. 99). This is the way of understanding technology that Heidegger articulates, and it serves in this thesis as a central underpinning for the myth of the Internet.

Heidegger begins his essay *The Question Concerning Technology* (1954/1977) by explicating the common understanding of technology. Having acknowledged this instrumental understanding of technology in which each piece of technology is a tool, a means to an end, he dismisses it as inadequate. It is not that technologies are not tools, Heidegger claims, but that to consider them as nothing other than tools is short-sighted<sup>21</sup>. As tools, technologies are controllable and passive. Our relationship with them is one-way, wherein we shape them and they cannot shape us. This understanding was for Heidegger an answer as to the function of technology, but not to what it actually is, its essence. He questioned what exactly we mean by the idea of technology as a tool. As a tool and thus a means to an end, he argues that technology can be understood as a cause, a reason for something, i.e. the end, occurring. For example, a windmill can be considered the cause

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Ellul (1964) has a similar understanding of technology, albeit one that is more positive. Ellul argues that technology is not neutral but rather that its inherent purpose is to create order. Because of this, he suggests that technology is desirable so long as we remember its purpose and boundaries.



of flour, as it is a tool used to grind wheat into flour. Here Heidegger pauses and turns from discussing technology directly to considering the term ‘cause’. He argues that to consider cause properly, we need to consider it on a deeper level than just a reason for something occurring. Using the work of Aristotle, he explains the philosophical four causes: *causa materialis*, the matter out of which something is made, in the flour example this would be the wheat; *causa formalis*, the shape the matter is crafted into, the fine powder of the flour; *causa finalis*, the end purpose or function, an ingredient to make bread; and *causa efficiens*, that which brings the object into being, the miller. Heidegger argues, however, that to conceive of the *causa efficiens* as the agent is to misinterpret what Aristotle had actually meant. He posits that Aristotle was referring to the *knowledge* of the agent. In the windmill example, the knowledge of the miller of how to turn the material, wheat, into the form, fine powder, to achieve the end purpose, the ingredient. The agent instead exists as the “first departure” (Heidegger 1954/1977, p. 8) for these four causes to be realised. The agent reveals the possibility promised by the causes by engaging with them; without the miller, the flour cannot be made, but the miller cannot make the flour without the material, the form, the end purpose, or the knowledge of flour-milling. The causes and the agent are indebted to each other, each responsible for bringing the flour into existence. Heidegger concludes his examination of the term ‘cause’ here, asserting that if we interpret cause as that which lets “what is not yet present arrive into presencing” (Heidegger 1954/1977, p. 10), we can begin to understand technology through a non-instrumental lens.

The essence of technology, then, is understood by Heidegger as “a way of revealing” (1954/1977, p. 12). Heidegger’s specific use of the phrase is best understood through another term he also relies upon, *poiēsis*, a Greek term referring to creation or the process of making something. Revealing is thus the process of bringing an object into being, but also an acknowledgement that the object is not the sole creation of the maker; the potential for the object exists regardless of the maker, and the maker simply un-conceals it. To continue the above example, the potential of flour already exists; the miller simply brings it into material consciousness. Heidegger’s reliance on

etymology and Ancient Greek understandings of technology creates space for a potential challenge to his argument, one that he pre-empts and dismisses. He suggests that an argument could be made that what he describes is the essence of Ancient Greek technology and has little relevance to modern technologies. He acknowledges concerns that modern technologies are created based on science and physics but is quick to reject this argument, citing the mutual relationship between science and modern technology, where each requires the other to advance; modern technologies create science as much as science creates modern technologies. Heidegger holds that modern technology “too is a revealing” (1954/1977, p. 14). It is instead the type of revealing that has changed.

The critical difference Heidegger sees between pre-modern technology and modern technology is that the former is a revealing that is a “bringing-forth” and the latter is a revealing that is a “challenging-forth” (1954/1977, pp. 10-11, 14-16). Revealing as a bringing-forth is simple and straightforward; the creation of flour using a windmill, for instance. Revealing as a challenging-forth is more complex, as it “puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored” (Heidegger 1954/1977, p. 14). Challenging-forth is predatory and, through it, objects and nature are determined by their use-value alone. The windmill used by the miller, for example, simply uses the wind to bring forth flour; the wind turbine, on the other hand, harnesses the wind, using it to create and accumulate power that can be put to use elsewhere. Heidegger argues that this process of extraction and accumulation leads to an understanding of the world as “standing-reserve” (1954/1977, pp. 17-18). Through this lens, everything is expected to be on standby, ready and waiting to be put to use. The wind is no longer just the wind but a potential energy source. Acceleration becomes vital; resources must always be at hand, stored so that they can be immediately applied. Challenging-forth thus never concludes, as it pursues further accumulation; this contrasts to the bringing-forth, which ends when the task at hand is complete.

Heidegger concludes that the essence of modern technology is not just a revealing but also a way of interpreting the world. Modern technology, he argues, creates an enframing, a framework

for ordering the world. An enframed world is calculable, discoverable, and logical. We as humans become more technical within this world, prioritising a problem-solution mindset that discards thinking of technology as anything other than an instrumental tool. There is danger in this, Heidegger argues, as it is not difficult to shift from seeing the natural world as standing-reserve to seeing humans as standing-reserve, valuable only for what can be extracted from them. The predation we enact on nature we also enact on ourselves, a notion that Heidegger suggests should give us pause. We are responsible as both the agent that reveals – as the miller, gathering together the material, the form, the end purpose, and the knowledge required to create flour – and as those who relentlessly pursue accumulation – constructing wind farms to extract energy from the sky. In this recognition of the essence of technology, Heidegger claims that we are given the opportunity to contest our place in the world not as a challenging-forth but once again as a bringing-forth. He points to art and poetry, understood by the Greeks as a kind of *technē*, a technology or a revealing, and suggests that through these that we can reject enframing and engage instead with nature and each other as a *poiēsis*.

Though Heidegger's work on the essence of technology is an exercise in metaphysics, I am not claiming that technology has a metaphysical essence in quite the same way that Heidegger suggests. What Heidegger refers to as modern technology's essence, enframing, can be just as well understood as the process of myth-making, where technology works to reinforce a particular understanding of the world. Heidegger offers a specific myth as the result of modern technology, one bound up in scientism and technothink. He also offers a reminder that there are alternative myths that use technology to be responsible for the world rather than exploit it. I argue in this thesis that the myth of the Internet amplifies the predatory understanding of humans as standing-reserve, whilst offering up a narrative that suggests it enables us to engage in *poiēsis*. The Internet is used to both extract value from us and to provide us with a creative space, and the myth of the Internet pushes us to consider this not only as a good thing but also as inevitable.

## A Hermeneutic Dialogic

I approach this piece of research as a process of hermeneutic dialogue. By hermeneutic, I indicate a process of re-reading, an understanding that I engage with texts within a particular social and historical context. Thus, there can be no ‘true’ or final reading of the texts, as they are always read through a lens removed from the lens through which they were initially written. This subjectivity should be self-evident, yet I highlight it here to emphasise the distance from which I write this thesis. I draw from the work of, amongst others, European philosophers and North American technologists. However, I do so from a semi-peripheral South-Pacific island nation, seemingly a world away from the lights and speed of Silicon Valley. Acknowledging this distance is essential, as I discuss American culture and American attitudes towards technology from the position of an outsider. This distance does not mean, however, that the outsider perspective lacks relevance. The depth of Silicon Valley’s penetration in this small nation and its consequences were made abundantly clear on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, 2019, in the city in which this thesis is written, when the world witnessed the massacre of 51 Muslim New Zealanders through Facebook’s live streaming service. The spectre of that event haunts this thesis and remains an unresolved reminder of the very real impacts that the myth of the Internet has on the world.

There is thus a conflict in my approach to the myth of the Internet. On one side, the Internet has connected my home to the world; despite massive oceans, I can engage with people and ideas from almost anywhere, which, as the descendant of colonists, has meant being able to engage with my Pākehā<sup>22</sup> identity in unprecedented depth. On the other side, the Internet has allowed for the pervasive spread of networks of hate at a speed unimaginable in the past. Videos from the 15<sup>th</sup> of March were being uploaded faster than Internet platforms could remove them;

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<sup>22</sup> The term Pākehā is, broadly, used to denote a (white) New Zealand-born citizen who is not genealogically Māori.

users edited the videos to bypass the digital identifier that platforms had created to automatically flag and remove reuploads (BBC 2019; Fingas 2019). The Internet offers both positive possibilities and social harms, a contradiction that is especially pronounced in the place in which I live.

Following Mikhail Bakhtin, I seek to put these conflicting understandings in conversation with each other. For Bakhtin, it is through continuous conversation that life occurs (Bakhtin 1963/1984, 1971/1986). The goal of a conversation is not necessarily to arrive at a consensus but to engage each other dialogically; conversation in this way, rather than being dialectical, is never-ending, unfinalizable. We ourselves are therefore unfinalizable, as we can never truly reach the end of our conversation with one another without also ceasing to be. Through the process of hermeneutic dialogue, I enter into a conversation with the myth of the Internet that continues outside of this thesis, never coming properly to a conclusion on the impacts that the Internet has on the world. The only possible conclusion that can be reached is that the conversation needs to continue.

The gathering of texts that make up the myth of the Internet has been an organic and pragmatic process. As the myth of the Internet is centred in the popular imagining of the Internet, there is a focus on material that exists in the everyday, discursive texts that are accessible to the average user. Technical and academic texts are of less concern here, as even though these texts filter down into popular material, they are engaged with primarily as soundbites, headlines, and tweets; few engage seriously with academic texts, for any number of reasons including paywalls, a lack of technical knowledge, or simply a lack of interest. These texts also level different questions at the Internet than this thesis; the majority of Internet critique is interested in how the Internet works and the effects those technical mechanisms have<sup>23</sup>, whereas in this thesis I consider the

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<sup>23</sup> These texts are discussed in more detail on p. 90, fn. 65.

underlying affective mythology of the Internet that is presented to users and the way it builds to a type of digital carnival. The majority of everyday users are less interested in how the technology works, simply that it does. Knowing that they are exploited for their data is a concern displaced by a concern with the availability of the digital service; this is why the six-hour Facebook outage in early October 2021 overshadowed the concurrent Congressional testimony of Frances Haugen in the popular consciousness (Aljazeera 2021; Isaac & Frenkel 2021; Trendsmap 2021), as the ability to use the service was of greater importance to users than what the service was doing to them. Thus, to consider the question of an everyday myth of the Internet, mainstream and popular texts that recount the history of the Internet have been integral: Johnny Ryan's *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future* (2011) has been instrumental, as have Fred Turner's (1999) work on the Internet as a new frontier, Jonathan Taplin's (2017) critique of the major Internet companies, and Lawrence Robert's (2007) Internet chronology. These texts are read alongside the work of journalists, such as Casey Newton (2018, 2020a) and Issie Lapowsky (2014, 2015a, 2015b), who report on and analyse the day-to-day activities of Internet companies; many of the scandals that engulf Silicon Valley today play out in the texts produced by journalists, and they are responsive to rapid shifts in the Internet landscape. The public statements of Internet figures such as John Perry Barlow, John Brockman's so-called Digerati, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Sheryl Sandberg, Sundar Pichai, Larry Page, and Sergey Brin are also important texts. These statements are where hegemonic narratives are constructed. These statements include, among other things, blog posts, open letters published on news websites, and letters written to investors that are made public in United States Securities and Exchange Commission filings. Each of these texts led me to the next, a snowball effect that characterises the evidence gathering process for this thesis.

I have sought to contextualise these texts that construct the myth of the Internet by placing the history they construct within a broader social history. To this end, I rely on texts that present an economic history of the United States since World War II, such as Edmund Berger's (2017) *Uncertain Futures*. Importantly, I also draw on texts that attempt to define a so-called American

Religion that emerged in the post-war period in response to the existential crisis posed by both the Cold War and the declining economic situation. These texts include the work of thinkers such as Will Herberg (1955/1960), Robert Bellah (1967/1974), Sidney Mead (1967/1974), and John Wilson (1979). This idea of an American Religion itself draws upon some of the great myths of America, such as America existing as a city on the hill and the conceptualisation of the frontier as described by Frederick Jackson Turner (1893/1998) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The values expressed by this American Religion can still be read on the social landscape today. For example, at President Donald Trump's 2019 impeachment hearing, senators and congressional representatives drew upon constitutional language of freedom and democracy in their arguments (Guardian News 2020; The Washington Post 2020). The myth of the Internet exists in conversation with a myth of America, and I argue that it is the myth of America that allows a digital hegemony to continue.

These texts and the ideas therein ultimately reach a crescendo in the cacophony that is Bakhtin's carnival. I introduce Bakhtin more thoroughly in the thesis' final chapter; however, his ideas linger throughout, dancing around the edges as the fool whose continual presence is intended to remind everyone that carnival is on its way. Carnival is, at its most basic, an inversion of the world. It rejects the rules and boundaries of tradition, replacing them with "free and familiar contact" between a typically segregated cross-section of society (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 10). Bakhtin envisioned carnival as the realisation of alternative forms of social organisation, exposing the standard hierarchy of society as contingent and malleable. It is this idea of an alternative that resonates within the myth of the Internet. The gatekeepers of the Internet promise liberation from our mundane everyday lives and the possibility of unfettered connection and social progress. Within this myth, the Internet is presented as a challenge to the status quo, where rules and traditions are turned over to the people rather than the elite.

As I show in the final chapter, however, when contextualised by Bakhtin's life and other concepts, it can be argued that carnival was never necessarily a better way of living. It was not

inherently a utopia of freedom, a paradise without class, gender, or ethnic division. It was, for better or worse, an alternative. Typically, there are two readings of Bakhtin's carnival: the first positions carnival as a subversive expression of oppressed people within society, where they use carnival as a way to push back against the traditional hierarchy in favour of a more equitable society; and the second positions carnival as a tool of the traditional hierarchy, who allow the oppressed an opportunity to 'blow off steam', thus containing any thoughts of rebellion. By shifting away from assigning carnival a moral or immoral imperative, a third reading emerges of Bakhtin's carnival as the imagining of an alternative that is at once subversive *and* containing. In utilising this third reading, I draw upon the works of James Dollimore (1994) and Theodore Levin (1990), both of whom explore the debate between subversion and containment as a negotiation. I argue that the myth of the Internet can be understood via this negotiative carnival. The Internet is both subversive and containing, although the subversive carnival that the Internet elite promise remains unfulfilled; to maintain their present hegemony, the Internet elite defer the future and suspend us in the perpetual present.

Bakhtin did not specifically address the threat of a perpetual carnival; in the carnival Bakhtin describes, the participants are all aware that it will end, that official life will return. To conceptualise a perpetual carnival, I turn to ideas of permanent liminality as put forward by Arpad Szakolczai (2000, 2017). Developing further Victor Turner's (1969, 1982) notion of liminality, Szakolczai describes permanent liminality as the continuation of a temporary suspension of everyday life. This permanent suspension ultimately becomes plagued by existential anxiety, the problematization of truth, and what Gregory Bateson calls "schismogenesis" (1972, p. 68), where conflict continuously escalates as any ending is denied. I argue that within the myth, the Internet has shifted from being the temporary inverse to being the permanently inverse, manifesting many of the issues that Szakolczai has described. Our understanding of what the Internet is has slipped away from the control of the digital hegemony, coming to rest instead in the hands of a public suffering a perpetual existential crisis, spiralling away from any semblance of order and control.



The perpetual digital carnival encourages nihilism and hedonism in equal measure, entrenching the notion that it is both natural and inevitable and, therefore, unchallengeable.

I argue in this thesis that by conceptualising the Internet as myth and carnival, the technological determinism that pervades current discourse, where the Internet elite locate a solution to our social problems within more technology<sup>24</sup>, can be problematized. The inevitable becomes contingent, and the beliefs and narratives built up in Silicon Valley can be brought to the forefront, ready and able to be dismantled.

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<sup>24</sup> There are no signs that this attitude is receding in the beliefs and actions of the Internet elite; Facebook's rebranding as Meta, which occurred in late October 2021, just as the examination process for this thesis was being concluded, is part of the overall technological determinism of the myth of the Internet. Meta exists as a continuation of the deeply held beliefs of a technological good, and operates as a way to displace the controversies of Facebook by suggesting that the new 'meta-verse' technology is able to overcome the issues that have plagued the company in recent years. As such, changes in technology and new digital platforms do not derail the myth of the Internet, but continue to normalise and entrench it deeper within society.

# One: The Myth of America

“America is an idea. The most unique idea in history.”

– 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Joe Biden (2021)

When considering the Internet, it is important that we do not abstract it by treating it as an immaterial entity that somehow exists beyond and despite us as humans. It is not, quite, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s noösphere, an evolutionary addition to our planet. It is not a “thinking layer”, a “new skin”, a “soul” to sit above rock and flesh (1969, p. 202), despite what tech evangelists such as John Perry Barlow have claimed (Kreisberg 1995). The noösphere, for the controversial<sup>25</sup> Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin, is an inevitable herald of the unity that will occur with the second coming of Christ; it exists as part of a predetermined historical trajectory that ultimately leads to a so-called Omega point of convergence of the universal and the personal. Rather than treat the internet as part of a metaphysical and theological predetermined narrative, in this thesis I situate it in its historical and geographical context. This means necessarily attending to the origins of the internet in the United States and examining the social framework within which it was developed and has subsequently grown. As indicated in the previous chapter, I argue that the myth of the Internet is built on the framework of a myth of America. In many ways, it has become easy for us to overlook the role that the United States has played in shaping the Internet; the Internet is now a global phenomenon, with various countries and territories contributing both technical expertise and creative content to its ongoing presence in our world. Regulations from

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<sup>25</sup> Teilhard de Chardin was regarded as heretical by the Catholic Church, who claimed in 1962 that his work contained “ambiguities and indeed even serious errors, as to offend Catholic doctrine” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2021). Prior to this declaration, Teilhard de Chardin had already been cautioned numerous times for his unconventional theological writings; he had been essentially exiled to China at least twice, and ordered by the Church to stop writing on theological matters and focus on scientific ones – Teilhard de Chardin was a trained palaeontologist, and when not in Asia would teach in European Catholic universities (Grim & Tucker 2021). Despite the Church’s official position, he remained popular with many Catholics and with those outside the Church.

outside the United States shape the global experience: the privacy and consent directives of the European Union's 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), for instance, have been applied by companies such as Facebook and Microsoft at a global level, rather than only being provided to users located within European Union countries (Brill 2018; Egan & Beringer 2018). It is easy to forget that the Internet was built on network architecture developed with funding from the United States military (Ryan 2011) and that the United States government only relinquished ownership of this architecture in the middle of the 1990s (Naughton 2016). On the one hand, the United States government held ownership over the internet's architecture for three decades, shaping it in its infancy. On the other hand, the network has not been under the custodianship of the United States for two and a half decades, seemingly an eternity given the rapid pace with which content on the Internet emerges and is subsequently replaced with something new. This is why it is important to recognise the origins of the internet within the United States. These origins provide illumination as to why the Internet currently operates the way it does. As I go on to argue in the next chapter, the specific contexts of the United States in the three quarters of a century following World War II have created the conditions for the Internet to not only exist but to also thrive. Shifts in the social zeitgeist, shifts in political philosophies, and shifts in the economic projects of the United States have deeply impacted the way the Internet has emerged as a central facet of twenty-first century capitalism, and have enabled those who found, own, and run the largest digital companies to accumulate disproportionate levels of social, economic, and political capital.

The United States context offers the Internet elite an important additional benefit: a national mythology within which to position themselves<sup>26</sup>. A national mythology offers established traditions and an entrenched set of values and ideas from which to draw upon, allowing the myth

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<sup>26</sup> It is in this national mythology that the 'United States' becomes 'America'; similar to the contrast between the 'internet' and the 'Internet', in this thesis I contrast between the 'United States' as a geopolitical entity and 'America' as a mythological nation. This is further discussed on pp. 43 – 4 below.

of the Internet to be blended into a historical narrative, becoming the next step in the national story. By drawing on the myth of America, the Internet elite can suggest that the Internet is a logical and inevitable result of a centuries-old trajectory, an evolution in technology that was set in motion with the invention of the printing press. The notion of manifest destiny that propelled the expansion of the United States across North America is secularised and co-opted by the Internet elite, used to legitimate the global expansion of their companies. The Internet elite are thus able to claim a prized position in American discourse and regulation; it becomes difficult for the United States government to regulate digital companies meaningfully, as to restrict the growth of the Internet is ideologically akin to restricting America itself. By aligning the myth of the Internet with the myth of America, the Internet elite are able to use America as a type of armour, protecting themselves at home from the kinds of legal consequences they face abroad<sup>27</sup>. In this imagining, the internet becomes the product and repository of American ingenuity, American freedoms, and American exceptionalism; in short, the internet becomes “the Internet”.

The myth of America exists as a type of politicised speech intended to make the subjective appear objective, a way to frame opinions as fact and belief systems as inherent. It is also a responsive narrative that lacks concrete definition so as to allow it to be taken up by people who hold diverse and often competing ideological positions. Typically, the myth of America is a narrative that ties a particular set of values to a particular understanding of historical events and experiences, to be used by those with power to define what the nation of America stands for and

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, large internet companies such as Amazon, Facebook, and Google face content restrictions in parts of Asia, and are increasingly coming under fire from other Western governments such as Australia and the European Union. Despite these challenges, the conflation of the Internet and America also protects internet companies internationally as the United States government is often retaliatory when other governments restrict American companies. For example, recent moves to charge digital companies for hosting Australian news media content on their platforms has lead the United States to inform Australia that to go through with the proposed regulations risked Australia experiencing “harmful outcomes” (Wahlquist 2021). Similar issues have occurred with the UK’s move to add tax to digital services, causing the United States to threaten higher tariffs on export goods in retaliation (Inman 2021).

what it means to be an American. It becomes something of a civil religion, which brings the society together as one and provides them with a framework for understanding the place in which they live (Bellah 1967/1974; Herberg 1974; Richey & Jones 1974). That it can never refer to anything definitive – a comprehensive and universal America does not exist – makes the myth of America ephemeral and difficult to pin down. In response to this, I turn to what Raymond Williams terms a structure of feeling: “the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization” (1961, p. 48). Per Williams, a structure of feeling is the sum of various aspects of culture but is irreducible to those individual aspects. The myth of America can be understood in this way: the sum of various individual mythologies and cultural experiences, but not represented by any specific one of them.

There are limitations when it comes to studying a structure of feeling. Williams argues that whilst we can reduce the study of a particular period or community to the examination of an individual aspect of culture, such as a specific fashion style or a specific popular novel, we are limited by our temporal distance from the “living experience” (1954/2014, p. 861). For example, Williams argues that no one today can completely understand nineteenth-century novels:

Nobody has read, or could have read, all its examples, over the whole range from printed volumes to penny serials. The real specialist may know some hundreds; the ordinary specialist somewhat less; educated readers a decreasing number: though all will have clear ideas on the subject. A selective process, of a quite drastic kind, is at once evident, and this is true of every field of activity. Equally, of course, no nineteenth-century reader would have read all the novels; no individual in the society would have known more than a selection of its facts. But everyone living in the period would have had something which, I have argued, no later individual can wholly recover: that sense of the life within which the novels were written, and which we now approach through our selection. Theoretically, a period is recorded; in practice, this record is absorbed into a selective tradition; and both are different from the culture as lived. (Williams 1961, p. 50)

Temporal distance keeps us from a comprehensive understanding of past periods and communities, however living in the same moment as that which we are examining is no guarantee of comprehension either. We are each influenced by our individual experiences and interpretations, by the knowledge and realities we are able to access. We can each estimate what we believe the structure of feeling for our period or community may be, but we can never be certain. One nineteenth-century reader may place heavy emphasis on the attitude and ethos of *The Times* daily newspaper, as it was the leading daily paper; another may instead place that emphasis on the attitude and ethos of *News of the World*, a Sunday newspaper with a larger circulation than *The Times* (Williams 1961). It is difficult, if not impossible, to say which better reflects the culture of the period. In this way, the structure of feeling is both collective – representative of a culture – and individual – subject to personal interpretations. To understand the myth of America as a structure of feeling is to understand it as fluid and something that can be approximated rather than unreservedly known. It is the sum of various pieces of “recorded culture” (Williams 1961, p. 49) – statues, presidents’ speeches, national holidays, novels, music, films – that together create a sense of what ‘America’ might be. It is a possible America, a future America. At the same time, it is something immaterial, fleeting, and always just out of reach.

The purpose of this chapter then is not to come up with a definitive definition of America and Americans. It is instead to develop a working definition, a lens through which the myth of the Internet can be read. Scholars and observers have said much about the existence of a common American narrative that works to bind the peoples of the United States together and defines them as a nation. From the classic studies such as Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1835 *Democracy in America* (1835-40/1969) and Fredrick Jackson Turner’s 1893 *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893/1998) to post-World War II treatises such as Will Herberg’s (1955/1960) *Protestant – Catholic – Jew* and Sacvan Bercovitch’s (1975) *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, the examination of a characteristic American experience is well-trodden ground. In developing a myth of America, I engage with these thinkers, positioning them dialogically alongside one another to draw out their

common themes and ideas. What emerges is a definition steeped in frontier mythology and exceptionalism. It is an imagined America that exists as a city on the hill, populated by pioneers and cowboys who champion individualism and a hands-off government. It is also a deeply religious nation, rooted in Protestant ideas of predestination and Gnosticism. As I begin to discuss here, and analyse more thoroughly in subsequent chapters, these themes and ideas appear within the myth of the Internet as well, acting as a bridge between the immaterial Internet and the geographic cultural location it is built within. As the Internet continues to spread out across the globe, it takes with it the beliefs and values of the myth of America, changing the supposedly global universality of the Internet into a specifically American universality, which I argue is then turned out onto the world as a form of digital American imperialism. Thus, the myth of the Internet colonises local experiences of the internet; we all become, in the phrase Greil Marcus borrowed from Leslie Fiedler, “imaginary Americans” (Bonomoa 2012, p. 197; Fiedler 1975, p. 355).

## The Boundaries of the Myth of America

In the 2020 United States Senate presidential impeachment trial<sup>28</sup>, Democrat House Manager Adam Schiff claimed in his opening statement that “America is not just a country, but an idea” (The Washington Post 2020). He pointed to America’s place as a shining city on a hill, a beacon for others to look to for guidance, albeit attributing the quote to President Ronald Reagan rather than to the puritan preacher John Winthrop or, more accurate still, to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew – though in this case, attributing the quote to Reagan is perhaps more apt, as it was Reagan who added the *shining* adjective into the original metaphor (Gamble 2012). With these

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<sup>28</sup> This was the first of President Donald Trump’s two impeachment trials. In this first trial, the charge of impeachment was brought by the House of Representatives in late 2019, and tried in the Senate in early 2020. Whilst the House charged the President with impeachment, the Senate did not convict him; members of congress voted along party lines in this trial. The second trial took place in the House in early 2021, and was tried in the Senate a few weeks later. In this trial, the House charged the President with bipartisan support, and the Senate again did not convict, though it has been noted that the votes to convict were the most bipartisan for any impeachment trial (Luscombe 2021).

comments, Schiff linked his opening statement and the case for impeachment to a particular imagining of America, purposefully drawing on an assumed shared cultural understanding to appeal to the hearts and minds of the gathered senators and the American public. Schiff used the idea of America as a shining city upon a hill to remind the Senate that it had a duty to uphold these supposedly age-old American values. He presented the values as unquestionable, unarguable, the ultimate authority which no one could hope to challenge. Schiff did not explicate much further on what he meant by America as an idea or a shining city. He did not need to. For Schiff, his senate colleagues, and the American public there exists a mythologised America, an ideal imagining of the nation that has a value language that enables Schiff to reasonably expect his audience to be able to interpret the implicit meaning in his words without him needing to go into detail. That Schiff takes for granted that his audience will correctly interpret his reference to the shining city is emphasised by the fact he only says it once; the rest of his statement is largely repetitive, repeating the same arguments over and over to ensure that they are taken in, whereas the shining city needs only to be mentioned explicitly this one time, as he relies on the cultural entrenchment of an imagined America to ensure that its values are implicated in everything else he says.

The imagined America that underpins Congressman Schiff's speech is at once vague and specific. It requires the individual listener to connect the dots between symbols and meanings, leaving it open to diverse interpretations. At the same time, it is specific in that it uses historic cultural touchstones such as the 1630 city upon a hill sermon, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (Winthrop 1630/1969), which is often considered a cornerstone speech in American history (see for example: Gamble 2012; Greene 1993; Holland 2007; McKenna 2007; Miller & Johnson 1938; Paul 2014; Rodgers 2019; Williams 2010; Wilsey & Fea 2015). The imagery of the city on the hill is indicative of an American exceptionalism; it is the idea that America shines like a beacon for other nations to follow. However, it is not timeless imagery, understood and revered throughout the history of the United States. As Richard Gamble argues, over time the city on the hill has changed from "a biblical metaphor" into "a national myth" (2012, p. 5); it moves from Christian



theology to civil religion, enabling those outside of Christianity, such as the Jewish Congressman Schiff, to use it as their own. Gamble charts in *In Search of the City on a Hill* (2012) the way the metaphor has evolved across the history of the United States, locating its contemporary origins in the scholarly works of Harvard academic Perry Miller (1905 - 1963) and in the political and cultural charisma of President John F Kennedy (1917 – 1963). The city on the hill that Schiff invoked in 2020 was not the same city on the hill that Winthrop preached aboard the *Arbella* in 1630<sup>29</sup>, but rather one much more recent. This nuance is lost within the myth of America, however. The values of the present are retroactively applied to the past, creating a sense that America exists outside of time, a nation which at the heart holds to a set of unchallengeable values and beliefs. These values and beliefs are positioned as part of America's essence, natural and inherent and eternal.

The way that ideas such as the city on the hill have changed in relevance throughout the history of the United States exposes the notion of America's essence as contextual. Important to this discussion, then, is the context within which the myth of America is currently constructed. I want to consider here specifically how the myth exists as a myth of nationhood and how the myth is shaped to regulate who can and cannot participate in it. Central to this discussion is the acknowledgement that this is but just *one* myth of America; there are, of course, variations on this myth and others that contradict it entirely, such as myths that situate the focus on the values and history of Black Americans or of women. The myth discussed here is a dominant myth even if it is not necessarily held by the majority, as it exists within and shapes the political and economic systems of the United States, affecting them on a structural level. It is imagined as a transcendent myth available to all; however it is a myth defined by class, gender, and ethnicity, used to reproduce and naturalise the values and history of a white, bourgeois, and male society. It is also a myth of its moment, currently existing within a neoliberal capitalist framework. These boundaries are

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<sup>29</sup> There is debate about whether or not Winthrop actually gave this sermon whilst at sea, or even at all.

invisible within the myth, which is imagined as transcendent and eternal, and as ‘just the way things are’.

Whilst the general criteria are highly contextual – if you were to ask a hundred different people what defines America, you would likely get a hundred different answers – there are a handful of ideas that make up the core myth of America. These ideas act as a set of criteria that define the difference between ‘America’ and ‘Other’. These include a commitment to freedom, liberty, and equality, to the Constitution, and they are transcendent, unconcerned by identity markers beyond the claim of being American. These core ideas give the myth the appearance of consensus, a “social illusion that understanding has been achieved” (Robertson 1980, p. 5). The ideas act as mirrors, where their common repetition belies their ambiguity, creating a scenario where one can reasonably hear the idea of freedom invoked and not question what exactly it is the speaker means; the speaker means by freedom the same thing that the listener means, an understanding uncritically reflected back. This allows other ideas to be interpreted with the illusion of understanding; when African American Democratic Congressman Hakeem Jeffries claimed during the 2020 presidential impeachment hearing that the only thing more American than “baseball and apple pie” is the “sanctity of the United States Constitution” (Guardian News 2020), the analogy held because, like his colleague Schiff, Jeffries believed that his audience would take from those words the same thing that he meant. There is a presumption that the symbols are transcendent and that what they signify is unchanging and eternal, rather than interpretive. In and of themselves, baseball and apple pie are not unique to, or even originally from, the United States. When Jeffries invokes them, however, he loads them with reference to a cultural myth that accepts them as symbolic of an American culture: he implicitly calls up narratives of Johnny Appleseed, who planted apple trees along the Western frontier; of soldiers going off to war, fighting for “mom and apple pie”; of Abner Doubleday and the historically inaccurate belief that this American, a distinguished officer for the Union in the Civil War and acquaintance of Abraham Lincoln, had invented the game of baseball; of baseball games being played during World War II to keep the

nation's morale up. The ideas within these narratives – of the frontier, of freedom, of duty and patriotism – were all contained in Jeffries' short comment and he was challenging the gathered senators to disagree with him, to say that these values, and therefore the Constitution, were not ones that they were willing to uphold. Jeffries assumed that by invoking baseball and apple pie and by virtue of a shared myth of America, the senators would understand the implicit reference to a deeper set of values and thus be swayed to agree with him.

As a political tool used to bind together disparate peoples, the primary function of the myth of America is not dissimilar to other national myths; it works to create a sense of order within chaos and to naturalise a set of morals and values for a specific group of people (Schöpflin 1997). It asserts a demand of loyalty to a dominant cultural and political ideology, where membership to the group can be rescinded if that loyalty is not adequately shown. Exactly who gets to decide what counts as 'adequate' is unspecified, as it shifts with hegemonic power; the dominant group has the upper hand in determining the criteria, although as Gramsci (1971, 1985, 1988) indicates in regard to hegemonic power, the dominated have some leverage as concessions are typically made to them in order to secure their general consent. In this negotiation of values, America as a nation is bought into being; the values that are determined through the tension between dominator and dominated allow for the group to become something more than a variety of individuals that share the same territory or a political state, a unified nation with a shared set of cultural and political beliefs, values, and practices.

For clarity, the term 'nation' here is problematic. As Walker Connor points out, "*nation* and its derivative, *nationalism*, mean different things to different people" (1992, p. 48, emphasis in original). The term 'nation' is often used as a stand-in for a political state, though it has also been defined as being – "in its pristine meaning" (Connor 1992, p. 48) – more akin to an ethnic group or cultural group than a political group (Connor 1992; Gellner 1983; Hastings 1997; Hobsbawm 1992). The differing meanings of the term confuse the discussion and examination of nations and states, countries and ethnicities; indeed, as Walter Bagehot rightly pointed out about the term

‘nation’ back in 1872, “we know what it is when you do not ask us, but we cannot very quickly explain or define it” (Bagehot 1873/1915, p. 14). There are a few characteristics that many definitions of nation share in common, however; to exist as a nation, a body of people need to have an exclusive shared language, an exclusive shared history, and, in modern society, an indelible relationship with a political and territorial state (Gellner 1983; Hastings 1997; Hobsbawm 1992; Munslow 1996; Schöpflin 1997). This does not indicate that a shared ethnicity is required, nor a shared culture, and it also does not indicate that a nation is necessarily equivalent to a geopolitical unit. The nation in these definitions exists as a collective social body, defined by shared experiences, an identity to exist alongside ethnicity and culture rather than supersede them. To be sure, the nation in these definitions is a “social illusion” of cohesion, as James Oliver Robertson (1980, p. 5) has suggested. More often than not, the shared exclusive language and history are not actually shared by everyone assumed to be part of a particular nation and can also be shared by people assumed not to be part of that nation. The membership criteria for a nation is thus fluid and circumstantial, determined in the moment and claimed to be natural and eternal for the purposes of declaring someone either in the group or outside of it. The myth of a nation then is political, used to both grant and withdraw ideological citizenship; this most notably becomes apparent in the social treatment of legal immigrants, who despite being citizens under the law are often socially treated as though they are not (much work has been done on the discrimination faced by legal immigrants, for example: Abrego & Lakhani 2015; Cook 1998; Hersch 2018; Szaflarski & Bauldry 2019). To indicate this contrast, when discussing the geopolitical state, I refer to the United States, and when discussing the imagined nation, I refer to America.

The myth of a nation is, as Barthes says, “less reality than a certain knowledge of reality” (1957/2012, p. 228). It is an instrument of power, where the lived experiences of many people are ignored, and significant diversity is instead replaced by an imaginary community with common goals and shared values (Anderson 1983/2016). Thus, there is a violent rupture between the idealistic America of the myth and the practical lives of United States citizens (Dalsgård 2001); a

common language and a common history deny particularism within America as a nation. All histories that contradict the dominant narrative are rejected, as to admit that the constructed historical narrative is a falsehood is anti-American. This is not to say that those who believe in the myth of America are somehow deceiving themselves:

Centrally, myth is about perceptions rather than historically validated truths (in so far as these exist at all), about the ways in which communities regard certain propositions as normal and natural and others as perverse and alien. Myth creates an intellectual and cognitive monopoly in that it seeks to establish the sole way of ordering the world and defining world-views. For the community to exist as a community, this monopoly is vital, and the individual members of that community must broadly accept the myth. Note here that myth is not identical with falsehood and deception. *Members of a community may be aware that the myth they accept is not strictly accurate*, but, because myth is not history, this does not matter. (Schöpflin 1997, pp. 20 - 21, emphasis added)

No one is hoodwinked or brainwashed into accepting a myth<sup>30</sup>, and to accept the myth of America is not in itself an irrational position to take. However, whilst it is important to note that we retain some agency in determining which myths we do or do not accept, we are still subject to the power flows and information structures of the society around us. Like the myth of the Internet, a myth of a nation is not meant to reflect that nation accurately, but to represent the nation in the way that the hegemonic social group desire it to be represented.

What emerges then with the myth of a nation is what Connor (1992) refers to as a *staatvolk*. This term indicates the dominant group within a country when that group sees itself as representative of the nation as a whole; as an example, Connor (1992, p. 54) points to the United Kingdom and the white English tendency to consider the entire United Kingdom as nominally England and everyone within it as English, despite its various cultural and ethnic groups. As the

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, if someone is coerced into a belief, the belief can no longer be considered a myth.

hegemonic social group within the United States, White<sup>31</sup> Americans exist as a *staatvolk*, constructing a history where America exists as a descendant of an imaginary White Europe. The myth of America is shaped by this dominant force, transforming a country that is extremely heterogeneous into a nation that is ultimately White in its history, beliefs, and values.

Whilst it may not be the only myth of America currently being circulated within the United States at present<sup>32</sup>, the White myth of America is the hegemonic one. This particular myth is reflected in the White male Internet elite; the myth of the Internet acts as a continuation and expansion of the White myth of America, taking the values of America and universalising them for a global population. This White myth locates the nation's origins, and its citizens' origins for that matter, in puritan settlement and British and Northern European colonisation. This, of course, ignores the indigenous population and those without a biological or cultural connection to this imaginary White heritage; these peoples are assimilated into the myth of America to varying degrees depending on place, time, and context. In the context of the Internet, this assimilation often occurs when the Internet elite wish to make themselves appear progressive and as champions of diversity and equality. Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, flaunts the non-White populations that are assisted by his Free Basics program<sup>33</sup> (Internet.org 2015), but is criticised for using Free Basics to give Facebook the upper hand in emerging user bases and pushing American values onto non-American populations (Solon 2017). The White myth of America utilises a shift from a White Christian theology to a civil religion to ensure that, when included in the myth, there is a sense of permanent cohesion, as if these peoples had always fallen under the designation 'American', or, in Zuckerberg's case, 'human'. When the United States President-elect, Joe Biden, in 2020 claimed

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<sup>31</sup> The identity qualifier 'White' is itself complex and subsumes vast differences. Here it is used to refer to an imaginary identity that emerges out of Northern Europe and Britain and is Christian in its social and religious traditions.

<sup>32</sup> Recent, and historic, popular movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, to highlight the role of African Americans and other non-white groups within the history of the United States have frequently led to the construction of alternative myths of America that can be considered as counter-hegemonic.

<sup>33</sup> Free Basics is an Internet.org program that provides users access to select Internet services without data charges.

to be a president “for all Americans” (Biden 2020), he was invoking the myth of America to signal the diverse population as one people, implying a shared bond that goes beyond the circumstances of geography or ethnicity without explicitly challenging the White version of American history. Biden was seeking to re-assimilate those peoples who had been pushed out of the myth of America under the previous administration, as though their being pushed out was somehow antithetical to the myth of America, rather than part of a vital process within the myth itself. As a white, middle-class, Christian man, Biden does not present a threat to the White myth of America, allowing him to adjust it slightly to include these other peoples without upsetting the core beliefs and values the myth provides. When his Democratic predecessor, Barack Obama, did something similar with the slogan ‘Yes we can’, a phrase which has its roots with Latino union movements and thus implicitly draws these workers into the myth of America<sup>34</sup>, he was rewarded with challenges to the legitimacy of his running for office; it was suggested that he was not legally an American citizen at all and that because of his skin colour and name he must have been born somewhere else thus making him ineligible for the presidential office<sup>35</sup> (Crawford & Bhatia 2012; Hughey 2012; Serwer 2020). Obama’s very person innately threatens the White myth of America, whereas Biden instead represents it<sup>36</sup>.

Sitting within the White myth of America is the notion that the nation has a shared language and a shared history, and the notion that the geopolitical entity that is the United States of America is the same as America the nation. To conflate the geopolitical state with the nation is

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<sup>34</sup> Obama himself acknowledged the phrase’s origins when presenting Dolores Huerta with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012; Huerta had coined the phrase when she co-founded the United Farm Workers of America with Cesar Chavez (Office of the Press Secretary 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Granted, Biden also faced challenges of his legitimacy as president, but in relation to the validity of the electoral process, not regarding whether or not he was eligible to run in the first place. In both the Obama and Biden situations, Donald Trump was the main instigator for the challenges and the Internet played a vital role in spreading the accusations to a global audience.

<sup>36</sup> Biden’s vice president, Kamala Harris, has also faced similar resistance to her legitimacy as Obama because of her skin colour (Alba 2020; Ellis 2020; Ordoñez 2020).

problematic, as it creates a situation wherein those who do not identify with the nation are sidelined by the state. Those who are citizens of the state but not of the nation become outsiders, given access to the basic legal protections of the state only when the myth of the nation does not override these protections. For instance, in the myth of America, those who serve their country in a defence capacity – primarily in the armed forces but increasingly in a militarized domestic police force – are sacred; they are the ones offering the so-called greatest sacrifice to defend the interests of the state and the nation<sup>37</sup>, and they are lionised for their efforts<sup>38</sup> (Fallows 2015; Saad 2018; Schmidt 2012). This becomes problematic when there is conflict between the police and state citizens who are not nation citizens: those outside of the myth of the nation are treated as secondary to those within it, and so in conflicts involving the police, deference is given to the police as they are the state representatives of the myth of the nation. This can be seen in the shootings of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, both African American men who were shot and killed by white police officers in 2014 and 2012 respectively (Alvarez & Buckley 2013; Eligon 2020). Officer Darren Wilson, who killed Brown, was never charged with a crime, despite Brown being unarmed. Officer George Zimmerman, who killed Martin, faced a charge of second-degree murder, but a jury trial subsequently found him not guilty; Martin, again, was unarmed. Whilst public protests erupted from these events (Davey & Bosman 2014; Swaine 2015), that neither officer was convicted of a crime indicates that the primacy given to those who serve to protect the nation is reflected in the legal structure of the geopolitical state and is representative of the way the nation and the state are intertwined.

The recent public response to the police shootings of African Americans has been constructed on the Internet. There have, of course, been widespread physical protests in cities

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<sup>37</sup> This is also representative of the shift from Christian theology to a civil religion, where the sacrifice of Jesus is replaced by the sacrifice of the American citizen.

<sup>38</sup> An example of this is in the digital ‘Walls of Thanks’ that appear on a wide variety of websites, particularly around Veterans Day on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November in the United States. There is great diversity in the kind of websites hosting these walls, from universities (University of Alabama 2020) to automotive glass companies (K&K Glass 2020).



across the United States and in other countries, but it is unlikely the protest movement would have gained as much traction without the broad reach and continuous stream of debate on social media. The Internet operates here as a tool of social justice and makes it possible for outrage to spread rapidly through society. The myth of America is reconstructed and globalised through the Internet as users seek to change the narrative that allows African Americans to be killed with apparent impunity. However, the Internet is ambiguous. Whilst it is a space where the dominant myth of America can be reconstructed, it is also a space where it can be reinforced. The Internet becomes a convenient and effective way to attack protestors as unpatriotic, as has occurred in recent responses to athletes who have refused to stand during the national anthem before a game; these players are criticised for bringing politics into sport (Graham & Pengelly 2017; Pack 2016; Raache 2020) – as though sport has always been politically neutral and as though the act of standing for the national anthem is not in itself a political choice. The 2016 protest movement wherein players would kneel during the national anthem originated with Colin Kaepernick, an NFL football player who refused to stand in order to protest the racial injustice endemic within the United States (Wyche 2016). Kaepernick himself was dropped by his team and faced a barrage of criticism from fans and officials alike. President Trump accused him of disrespecting the flag and the military servicemen and women who serve under it (Graham & Pengelly 2017). The late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg called him “dumb and disrespectful”<sup>39</sup> (Wagoner 2016). Veteran NFL player and civil rights activist Jim Brown labelled Kaepernick’s approach a desecration of the flag (Perez 2017). One of the NFL’s and Kaepernick’s most prominent sponsors, Nike, considered ending their contract with him (Creswell et al. 2018); he ultimately remained un-used in their promotional material for over a year, before Nike launched a campaign based on the rising support

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<sup>39</sup> Justice Ginsburg later withdrew and apologized for these comments, claiming that she was unaware of the full context when she made them. This is the consequence of the speed of the Internet, as information spreads without context or clarification and we expect comments from officials equally as quickly, resulting in knee-jerk reactions to generalisations rather than considered reflections to such divisive events.

Kaepernick was receiving from young people<sup>40</sup>. This move allowed the company to capitalise on the burgeoning social justice and Black Lives Matter movements, garnering themselves “record engagement” online with their target audience (Creswell et al. 2018). However, the campaign did not leave Nike unscathed as it is estimated their stock fell 3 per cent following its launch, with fans taking to social media to protest by burning and destroying their Nike apparel (Meyersohn 2018). Republican Senator Ted Cruz went so far as to declare that Nike was “on the wrong side of the American people” (Meyersohn 2018).

The responses to Kaepernick have been visceral and visual; they are constructed by users as a spectacle for others on the Internet to either cheer on or deride. Kaepernick’s protest found support across the NFL, with other players kneeling during the national anthem. The responses were swift: President Trump claimed that the disrespect should be a “deportable offence” (Edelman 2018); conservative media blamed the protests for the falling NFL viewership ratings (Richardson 2018); police officers refused to work off-duty security for NFL games (Seraaj & Zdanowicz 2017); fans begun burning their NFL memorabilia and season tickets<sup>41</sup> (Seraaj & Zdanowicz 2017). Outside of the NFL, high school football players were threatened with being kicked off their school teams if they knelt during the anthem (Bogage 2017); the threat was followed through in Texas, where two players were told to remove their uniforms immediately once the anthem ended (Coleman 2017). Various NASCAR racing team owners threatened their teams with dismissal should they attempt to protest during the national anthem (Bieler & Hamilton 2017). The same threat was made to players of the United States ice hockey team (Pack 2016). A State representative for Oklahoma threatened to reconsider the tax benefits given to the Oklahoma

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<sup>40</sup> The support Kaepernick received from young people exemplifies the fluid nature of the civil religion and the myth of America; the imagining of what America is and stands for has shifted over time.

<sup>41</sup> The support and responses reflect the ambiguity of the myth of America, as the defining characteristics of American identity are determined by the individual. There is an assumption that, as a symbol, America is transcendent and part of a common language, however situations such as these problematize those assumptions.

City Thunder NBA team if their players joined the protest<sup>42</sup> (Raache 2020). These responses have all been documented and put on display for the crowd watching through the Internet. They are stories that users craft to provoke emotional reactions in order to achieve maximum engagement and notoriety. The impetus for virality on the Internet frames the way users respond to the myth of America, encouraging users to reach for further extremes in order to define what it means to be an American.

There are, of course, no specific individuals controlling which acts and interpretations are to determine citizenship. There is no conspiracy or secret cabal. What counts as American is decided by the society, a smashing together of traditional media, social media, politics, and community pressures that increasingly occurs using the Internet. As put forward within the myth of America, the American identity can thus be understood as contextually relational and reactional, coming into existence as people seek meaning and origins within a particular socio-cultural historical narrative.

The myth of America acts as an answer to the question of identity, defining who is always an American, who is sometimes an American, and who is never one at all. Questions of identity prominently arrive in moments of crisis, and it is in crisis moments when the myth of America is made visible; as George McKenna (2007, p. xiii) argues, for the remainder of the time, the myth remains dormant:

When the chips are down, when the stakes are high, American political leaders go back to the narrative and even the language of the Puritans; they do it then, especially, because that is when Americans especially want to hear it. [...] It reappears each time the nation needs to gird its loins, concentrate its mind, and throw itself against whatever threatens its life: a foreign foe, a domestic rebellion, a Great Depression, a conspiracy of terror. After the crisis has passed, ‘normalcy’

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<sup>42</sup> The NBA has an official rule against kneeling during the national anthem, however Commissioner Adam Silver claims that the rule would not be upheld at this time due to the “unique circumstances” of the protest movement (Quinn 2020).

eventually returns, and Americans may even become a little embarrassed by what they had solemnly pronounced only a short time earlier. But the old Puritan language will reappear with the next crisis.

The myth of America comes into being as it is needed, responsive to the situation and the goals of the hegemony who invoke it. In times of crisis, the myth of America is used to bind the people together and serve as a point of stability within chaos; it is a civil religion, presented as the unchanging truth, a fixed point from which the nation can get its bearings.

## The Quest for Origins

In his 1931 polemic *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Herbert Butterfield argued that the historians<sup>43</sup> “quest for origins” (1931, p. 43) is problematic. He claims that to look for the singular definitive source of an event or belief or a social structure is an impossible task:

The very form of our question is at fault if we ask, To whom do we owe our religious liberty? We may ask how this liberty arose, but even then it takes all history to give us the answer. We are in error if we imagine that we have found the origin of this liberty when we have merely discovered the first man who talked about it. We are wrong if we study the question in that over-simplified realm which we call ‘the history of ideas’, or if we personify ideas in themselves and regard them as self-standing agencies in history. We are the victims of our own phraseology if we think that we mean very much when we say that religious liberty ‘can be traced back to’ some person or other. And if we assert that ‘but for Luther’ this liberty would never have come down to us as it did come, meaning to suggest that it has come down to us as the glory and the achievement of Luther, we are using a trick in text-book terminology which has become the whig historian’s sleight-of-hand. It may be true to assert that there are many

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<sup>43</sup> Butterfield was specifically discussing Whig historians, however as William Cronon (2012) and others rightfully point out, Butterfield never actually names any particular historians or Whigs in his essay nor does he provide any clear definition as to who these people are or were. Butterfield does claim however that “there is a tendency for all history to veer over into whig [sic] history” (1931, p. 6), suggesting that his arguments can be applied beyond specifically Whig historians.

things in history and in the present day which would never have happened in the way they have happened if Martin Luther had not defied a Pope; there are equally many things which would not have taken place as they have done if Columbus had not discovered America; but it is as fallacious to ascribe paternity to Luther in the one case as it is to make Columbus responsible for modern America; *we can only say that both men added a conditioning circumstance to a whole network of other conditioning circumstances more than four centuries ago.* In reality we can no more work out what religious liberty owes to Luther than we can calculate what proportion of the price of a man's suit in 1930 ought to be divided between the inventor of the spinning-jenny, the inventor of the steam-engine, and the firm which actually wove the cloth. It is meaningless to trace liberty along a line which goes back to Luther merely because Luther at one time and in a world of different connotations put forward some principles of freedom, from which as a matter of fact he shrank when he saw some of the consequences that we see in them. (Butterfield 1931, pp. 43-45, emphasis added)

A quest for origins is exactly what the myth of America is, however. It seeks to provide a meaningful and teleological explanation for the American national character, a line of causation that can be traced from the first settlers and colonists through to the present day. The city on the hill imagery that Congressman Schiff drew upon can be considered part of this quest for origins: it locates American origins with the Puritans, religious refugees seeking a better future and the freedom to worship as they see necessary. Schiff connects this through time to President Reagan and the memory of a reinvigorated economy and the fall of communism in the Soviet Union, drawing out moments of triumph for the United States. As a quest for origins, the myth of America highlights the nation at its peak, as a victor and a progressive force for the common good. It is a nation that has been good from the beginning, the myth confirms, good in its essence and at its core. Like any quest for origins, this is problematic; it prizes the apparent essential good of a hegemonically dominant myth, implying that anything that sits outside that myth is inherently bad. To use a metaphor such as the city on the hill as a way to call for unity and a reminder of the duty of exceptionalism is not only to retroactively assign it an importance and a meaning that is not

historically consistent but it is also to neglect other “conditioning circumstances”, as Butterfield put it, that played a part in the imperial endeavour that was the colonisation of the Americas. Through the dominant myth, the nation’s origins become framed by freedom and a glorification of capitalism, casting the settlers as the righteous and persecuted, obscuring the oppression of indigenous peoples and the tragedies of the Atlantic slave trade that made that settlement possible.

The placing of the city on the hill sermon as an origin text within the myth of America is still relatively recent, as noted above. Other key principles linked to the nation’s origins are similarly recent: for example, the way the First Amendment to the Constitution is understood today can be traced back to the 1960s, Emily Bazelon (2020) argues, when the Supreme Court ruled that the arrest of a Ku Klux Klan leader who spoke at a rally was unconstitutional as the government could not limit the free speech of citizens. Bazelon points to subsequent Supreme Court rulings that put free speech, regardless of content, on a pedestal: the 1992 ruling that city officials could not punish under the conviction of a hate crime those who publicly burn crosses or display swastikas, and the 2011 ruling that stated there was nothing the government could do to stop the Westboro Church members from picketing military funerals. These rulings emphasise a cultural and political attitude that has digressed from the past, where it was once deemed acceptable for the United States government to punish those who were critical of it or to make editorial decisions on the type of content radio stations were required to air (Houser 1971; Ruane 2009). Today, free speech is treated as a sanctuary where the content of what individuals say is protected, where one cannot be punished for voicing their opinion. It is placed by liberals and conservatives alike as the cornerstone of democracy, allowing for dissent from majority opinions. It is what hinders legal regulation for content moderation on the Internet, as both politicians and Internet companies alike prefer to believe that they are not the arbitrators of personal opinions and expression; Section 230 of the of the United States Communications Decency Act protects Internet companies from having to restrict the speech of users by removing the companies’ legal liabilities for that speech (Newton 2020b). In the myth of America, free speech allows the people to hold the powerful to

account, a right validated historically in the nation's past through the rejection of the repression of the Catholic Church that in the American narrative instigated the settlement of the New World. In practice, the claim of free speech allows the powerful to justify their beliefs and behaviours; for example, the current charge of 'cancel culture' is levied against those who would object to White patriarchal systems of power, as though a restriction on violent and white supremacist rhetoric makes the beneficiaries of those systems the truly oppressed (Mishan 2020). In the myth of America, the championing of free speech as integral to democracy and a free society is woven into the fabric of the American identity, unassailable and unchanged since 1791, when the Amendment protecting speech was first established. The contextualisation of unfettered free speech emerging within the post-war United States is swept aside, replaced with the language of an inherent eternal right.

The importance of the post-war period<sup>44</sup> to the myth of America as it stands today cannot be understated. Socially, economically, and politically, this period was incredibly turbulent. It was a period where the United States saw itself become a global superpower and one where that same authority was shaken by financial crises and diplomacy struggles that historian Theodore White has called nothing less than a "National Humiliation" (1982, p. 21). It is within this turbulence that identity becomes a significant national question, shaping a narrative of a nation that is "the greatest [...] in the world" (PBS NewsHour 2021a) and a "north star" (PBS NewsHour 2021b) for other countries to follow<sup>45</sup>. The American identity emerges as a reclamation of power and a utopian vision of the future, neither of which necessarily matches the lived realities of everyday American citizens (Gamble 2012). It is a conservative identity, reactionary rather than progressive, and built

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<sup>44</sup> Theodore White (1982) suggests this period begins in 1945 and ends in 1980 with the beginning of the Reagan presidency, and I follow his definition here.

<sup>45</sup> These quotes are both from Congressman Ted Lieu, one of the House managers for President Trump's second impeachment trial in the Senate (see fn. 23). Lieu is a Catholic of Taiwanese heritage, once again emphasising the supposed transcendence of the myth of America encouraged by the civil religion.

on the predication of an imagined past. It was in this climate that many of the Internet elite grew up.

At the close of World War II, the United States was in a desirable position. They had helped the Allies to win the war, and the continental United States, unlike many other participants in the war, had not suffered significant damage to the geographical landscape. Factories built from the war were able to be converted to new forms of production, and returning service personnel were put to work, allowing for a boom in export manufacturing. By 1953, the United States dominated 29.3 per cent of the global export market (Berger 2017). The economic boom accompanied a sense of communal identity forged in the war, and to be an American was to be a success. President Roosevelt, in one of his so-called fireside chats<sup>46</sup> in October 1942, spoke of the unity he witnessed across the country:

This whole nation of one hundred and thirty million free men, women and children is becoming one great fighting force. Some of us are soldiers or sailors, some of us are civilians. Some of us are fighting the war in airplanes five miles above the continent of Europe or the islands of the Pacific -- and some of us are fighting it in mines deep down in the earth of Pennsylvania or Montana. A few of us are decorated with medals for heroic achievement, but all of us can have that deep and permanent inner satisfaction that comes from doing the best we know how -- each of us playing an honorable part in the great struggle to save our democratic civilization. (Roosevelt 1942)

The war provided a sense of common mission, making it easy for Roosevelt to speak to an apparent American spirit. Life in the immediate post-war years was comfortable for many, and the sentiment that the nation had banded together to emerge victorious was rewarded with improved

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<sup>46</sup> There is an interesting parallel here with the homely question and answer session New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden held during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Arden used Facebook Live to hold the session from her own bed after she had put her daughter to sleep. Video of the session can be seen here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/mar/26/jacinda-arden-hosts-coronavirus-qa-from-home-after-putting-child-to-bed-video> [viewed 29/06/2021]. Perhaps Roosevelt's chats would be livestreamed if he held them today.



living standards. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 ensured returning veterans would have access to affordable housing, low-interest loans, and higher education, an act of government spending that helped boost millions of Americans' economic prospects. The country was basking in the glory, both material and moral, of victory.

However, this economic prosperity and distance from the immediate dangers of war exposed the contingencies of this unity. Despite the Readjustment Act allegedly working for all veterans, Black<sup>47</sup> veterans were still limited in the help they received (Onkst 1998). Both legal and social discrimination kept Black veterans from accessing low-rate mortgages and enrolling in white-only universities (McCardle 2017). Women, too, were expected to fit into the White male American idea of success; there were expectations that women who had entered the workforce during the war would return to their homes, with their husband's wage enough to maintain a comfortable middle-class lifestyle (Anderson 1944; Santana 2016). This universalisation of White male American success is globalised in the myth of the Internet, a type of digital romantic humanism that takes its cues from the attitudes represented during this post-war period. The civil rights movement and women's liberation movement that have come to characterise much of the 1960s reflect the tension between the promise of America and its reality, a tension that, as I discuss in the next chapter, the Internet has not been able to solve.

Against the domestic upheavals of the 1960s sat the spectre of communism. Pitching it as a threat to their democracy, from the late 1940s and the start of the Cold War, the United States undertook an extensive campaign to make communism into the new enemy. Economically, communism threatened the capitalist system that benefitted many of the United States' political and social elite. Ideologically, this was spun into an attack on the heart of America, on its purpose and providence. American rhetoric became increasingly religious; the phrase 'under God' was

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<sup>47</sup> As with the White identity qualifier, the Black identity qualifier is complex and subsumes differences.

officially added to the Pledge of Allegiance by Congress in 1954, followed by 'In God we Trust' being taken up as the nation's official motto in 1956, nearly two centuries after the Declaration of Independence was signed (Van Engen 2021). Religion and capitalism positioned America as the antithesis of communism, setting up a Manichean dualism of good versus evil that became core to the narrative of American identity. In the face of domestic upheaval, the question of what makes an American was streamlined and simplified: an American was someone who, with the grace of God and Senator Joseph McCarthy, fought back against communism.

In the myth of America, the fight against communism was unquestionable. The victory in WWII had provided a reasonable basis on which to develop a foreign policy; it was America's duty to go out into the world and keep the peace, ensuring democracy and freedom for all. This ideological mission was woven into the American narrative by the likes of Perry Miller, who in the 1940s and 1950s dragged Winthrop's city upon the hill sermon out of obscurity and placed it at the centre of the American identity (Gamble 2012). Miller (1952/1969) discussed the sermon in militarised language, using phrases such as 'task force' and 'flank attack' that he had picked up during his time with the US Office of Strategic Services<sup>48</sup> during the war. The American mission was a soldier's mission, Miller suggested, and in the post-war period, this was turned on communism with force. The war in Vietnam, for instance, can be understood through this lens; it was the God-given duty of good American soldiers to aid the South Vietnamese in their fight against their heretical communist oppressors (Guttmann 1969; Morgan 2004; Scanlon 2013). President Reagan talked about the Vietnam War in this way; speaking to veterans at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention (VFWC) in 1980, he argued that

For too long, we have lived with the 'Vietnam Syndrome.' Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors who now threaten the peaceful people of Thailand. Over and over they told us for nearly

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<sup>48</sup> The US Office of Strategic Services was the forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency.

10 years that we were the aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests. They had a plan. It was to win in the field of propaganda here in America what they could not win on the field of battle in Vietnam. As the years dragged on, we were told that peace would come if we would simply stop interfering and go home.

It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause. (Reagan 1980a)

His speech to these veterans was significant, as they had just endorsed his run for the presidency against the incumbent President Carter, breaking an eighty-year precedence of the VFWC declining to endorse any political candidate (Scanlon 2013). Reagan decried Carter's handling of the military and defence budget, pledging to reinvest in the belief that the best defence is a good offence. He claimed that if the United States military was returned to glory, failures such as Vietnam and Korea could be avoided, and the communist threat to democracy could be pushed back. This preemption is the belief in a first-mover advantage, an attitude that would be used to justify developments in the Internet industry; in his testimony to the United States Congress in 2018, Zuckerberg argued that regulations for the Internet should not be too tight as they could constrain developments, allowing countries such as China to overtake the United States in a metaphorical Internet arms race (The Washington Post 2018a, 2018b). The beliefs that Zuckerberg holds are a reflection of Reagan's arguments in the 1980s. Reagan argued that it was the nation's responsibility to take the fight to communism, rather than waiting for it to strike on American soil:

We have strayed off course many times and we have been careless with machinery of freedom bequeathed to us by the Founding Fathers, but, somehow, it has managed to survive our frailties. One of those Founding Fathers spoke the truth when he said 'God intended America to be free.'

We have been a refuge for the persecuted and down-trodden from every corner of the world for 200 years. Today some of us are concerned by the latest influx of refugees, that boat people from Southeast Asia and from Cuba—all fleeing from the inhumanity of Communism. We worry about our capacity to care for them. I believe we must take a concerted effort to help them, and that others in the world should share in the responsibility.

But let's do a better job of exporting Americanism. Let's meet our responsibility to keep the peace at the same time we maintain without compromise our principles and ideals. Let's help the world eliminate the conditions which cause citizens to become refugees.

I believe it is our pre-ordained destiny to show all mankind that they, too, can be free without having to leave their native shore. (Reagan 1980a)

Reagan's speech was an attempt to reconfigure the narrative of the Vietnam War, casting aside those who protested against the United States' involvement as un-American, arguing that Americans "dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful" (Reagan 1980a). The Vietnam War, in Reagan's telling, was part of a larger war, one of good versus evil, and the loss America suffered was simply the loss of one battle because of the commander's lack of nerve. Through things such as the Free Basics program, Zuckerberg brings this war into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and positions himself as heir to Reagan's command.

The aggressive foreign policy that Reagan championed was a way to create an identifiable evil. The renewed attack on communism worked to legitimise the troubles the country had been facing since the early 1970s, such as the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 and the subsequent economic recession<sup>49</sup>. It was a reminder that communism was the true enemy and that the American people were duty-bound to unite against it; in the myth of America, these battles were part of a moral and ideological war, more so than they were a war over access to oil.

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<sup>49</sup> These crises were sparked by the Yom Kippur War which took place over nearly three weeks in October 1973, pitting a coalition of Arab states against Israel. Under President Nixon, the United States remained distanced from the conflict, until Israel, close to defeat, activated their nuclear arsenal. To keep Israel from needing to deploy their nuclear weapons, the United States sent combat airplanes, tanks, arms, and ammunition in an effort to resupply them. It has been said that the United States intervened because of the nuclear threat (Hersh 1991), however a CNA - a nonprofit research and analysis organization located in Arlington, VA, USA - report claims that this had little bearing on the decision to send supplies (Colby et al. 2013); instead the report locates the motive with the Soviet Union, who had been assisting the Arab coalition. In retaliation for the United States getting involved, OPEC put an embargo on oil exports to the United States and some of their allies, leading to the oil crisis of 1973. The Iranian Revolution in 1978 led to an escalation of a lingering oil scarcity in the United States, as the subsequent invasion of Iran by Iraq caused panic about oil supplies, causing OPEC to significantly raise the price of oil (Venn 2016).

Reagan showed during his time as President that he was adept at nation-building. In the wake of the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, which cost President Carter his re-election, Reagan was able to reconstruct an image at home of America as exceptional and a world leader. He engaged in populist rhetoric, gaining broad support from a public disenchanted with the previous administration and the ongoing economic crisis. The 1979 hostage crisis had seen the United States embassy in Tehran overtaken by militant supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini and the eventual failure of a military extraction to rescue 53 American hostages (White 1982). It was a global show of America's military might bought down in the Iranian desert, a result of poor planning, insufficient equipment, and an inability to understand the enemy (White 1982). What Reagan promised was that this failure would not be repeated on his watch, that it had not been the failure of the brave soldiers that died in their mission but the failure of a government that had grown complacent. He embarked on a course that would re-centre the American experience in limited government, where the individual was deferred to instead of managed, and in economic prosperity, reinvigorating a failing economy by passing it into the hands of a market not restricted by the same political responsibilities as the government (Melanson 1991). These changes were framed as a return to a "real" America, a return to an authenticity that previous governments had buried under regulations and politics. As I discuss in the next chapter, this neoliberalisation is what would eventually allow the Dot Com Boom to occur, and it also set the stage for the individualism that has become a core defence for the myth of the Internet. As Richard Melanson (1991) has argued, and is worth quoting at length because of the clarity of his claims, Reagan's policies can be understood as something of a religious endeavour; Reagan grounded his America within eternal values and the idea of the United States as a promised land:

Certainly Reagan's grand design possessed enormous appeal, largely because if deftly employed powerful symbols to tap into important dimensions of America's civil religion. Reagan's articulation of a shining city on the hill – compassionate, moral, strong, and exceptional – constituted the secular

equivalent of a stern yet loving Providence so ingrained in traditional American Protestantism. This city, dedicated to individual freedom and democratic government, had long served as a beacon of hope for all humanity. Reagan's 'dream' was for the rest of the world to experience the exhilaration of a democratic revolution, and now that America was once again prosperous and strong, it could help others achieve freedom.

What gave this grand design significance was not its originality. Woodrow Wilson and his cold war successors had shared comparable visions. But Reagan was the first president in a generation to invoke unabashedly these things without fueling firestorms of protests and derision. This 'dream' resonated positively through much of the population in part because it captured the essence of the new patriotism and in part because, with the decline of Communism and the retreat of the Soviet Union, it seemed both more plausible and less dangerous.

Furthermore, in contrast to the disguised and fuzzy designs of Nixon and Carter, which seemed retreatist and, in Nixon's case, amoral as well, Reagan's vision combined an unshakeable faith in the future with moral fervor. In Reagan's America it became politically impermissible to even hint at national decline or to doubt the universal validity of the American dream. Not surprisingly, the president and other administration officials repeatedly scored points by portraying the Democratic party as 'doomsayers' and the 'Blame-America-First crowd.' The Democrats, including Dukakis, responded by protesting the profundity of their optimism and patriotism. George Bush's pledge of allegiance ploy<sup>50</sup> in the 1988 campaign should be viewed as a heavy-handed (and effective) effort to exploit this component of the Reagan legacy. (Melanson 1991, pp. 187 – 188)

The civil religion that Melanson refers to here is a framework of American identity, emerging out of the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. It sits alongside anti-communism to create a sense

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<sup>50</sup> Bush weaponised the pledge of allegiance against Democrat Michael Dukakis on the 1988 presidential campaign trail, asking a crowd, "What is it about the Pledge of Allegiance that upsets [Dukakis] so much?" (quoted in Roberts 1988). Dukakis had vetoed a proposed bill in 1977 that would instruct teachers to lead their students in the pledge of allegiance, and Bush used this to paint his opponent as un-American.

of unity amongst the United States public to foster the national identity that had been disrupted by the social progress of the 1960s. Thinkers on the American civil religion sought to recast the history of the United States and the values of its citizens, seeking out a communal narrative that could transcend class, gender, and ethnicity (see for example: Bellah 1967/1974, 1974, 1976; Herberg 1955/1960, 1974; Long 1974; Mead 1967/1974; Wilson 1974, 1979). What emerged was a conceptualisation of civil religion that is conservative and nationalist, a re-justification for dominant hegemonic beliefs. It replaces race and gender with universality, as though the battle for equality had actually been settled long ago, a way to delegitimise voices of dissent and claims of unfairness. The work done on America's civil religion was primarily a good-faith attempt by academics to provide a rationale and explanation for national unity in the aftermath of massive disruption; the claim of an inherent equality at the heart of America can be justification for why the civil rights movement and feminism should be listened to, as much as it can be justification for silencing those same attempts at equality as unnecessary. However, the major works were primarily completed by a cast of Jewish and Christian white men – the same demographic that constituted the dominant hegemony, therefore limiting and problematizing their understanding of a supposedly universal American religion and identity. They were the very men for whom the dominant myth of America served best, thus casting a shadow over their notions of equality and fairness.

The American civil religion is an interesting example of the dominant narratives that sought to make sense of and construct an American identity in the post-war period. It reconstructs the myth of America in the aftermath of the United States' political and economic failures and remains a useful blueprint as to how the myth of America is conceived of today. President Reagan, for example, invoked the civil religion when he placed the city on the hill within his speeches, pulling it out of history and popularising it; unlike John Winthrop, Reagan did not link the city on the hill to Jesus' sermons, instead placing it at the heart of the nation as though it had always been there: "Our people always have held fast to this belief, this vision, since our first days as a nation" (Reagan

1980b). Reagan crafted a common set of defining beliefs structured on an imagined historical narrative, and this framework for understanding the American national identity holds today. The references to the city on the hill have proceeded from Reagan, most recently taken up in Amanda Gorman's poem, *The Hill We Climb*, at the 2021 inauguration of President Biden. Gorman says that "For while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us," and she urges the American public to be the "light" in the darkness (Gorman 2021). That Amanda Gorman is a young Black woman speaks to how central these ideas have become to the narrative of American identity. At a time when widespread civil rights protests demand justice for the racially motivated killings of Black Americans, Gorman draws upon rhetoric inspired by the imagined America of white men such as Reagan and Winthrop. She deftly combines the two seemingly opposed ideas to emphasise the common sentiment that rests beneath them; that America is a nation of progress, freedom, and equality and that Americans are uniquely capable of leading the world into a brighter future. It is in the moments of crisis that this rhetoric is dragged forth: Reagan was contesting with the country's worst economic situation since the Great Depression, and Gorman was at once eulogizing the tragedies of the Trump-era and setting out a path for the future. The White Protestant narratives of American history, both deeply religious and heavily secularised, are used as a reminder of the collective mission Americans are imagined to share.

The myth of the Internet is a continuation of this tradition, an expression of American exceptionalism and identity creation. For the Internet elite, the shift from an industrial society to a knowledge society has rendered traditional politics obsolete; this is clear in the increasing exasperation with which the CEOs of Internet companies answer questions for the United States Congress. For instance, in his 2018 Senate hearing Mark Zuckerberg seemed momentarily confused when Senator Orrin Hatch asked: "How do you sustain a business model in which users don't pay for your service?" After an extended pause, Zuckerberg responded: "Senator, we run ads." (quoted in The Washington Post 2018a). In a separate 2018 Congress hearing, Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai had to awkwardly inform Congressman Steve King that iPhones are made by



a different company and so he would be unable to explain how the notification systems on the iPhone work (Daily Mail 2018). In a 2021 hearing, Jack Dorsey became so tired of Congress' insistence on yes or no answers to complex questions that he turned to Twitter, and created a mocking poll asking users to vote either yes or no (Robertson 2021). For the Internet elite, politicians are unable to keep up and cannot meaningfully engage with technologies that they do not understand. Consequently, the United States is less important than America to the myth of the Internet. America as an idea has been digitised and exists online; it transcends geography and flesh. Digitisation universalises the myth of America, making it accessible to anyone who wishes to be an American. The myth of the Internet is thus the digital cry of the Statue of Liberty, calling for the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses<sup>51</sup> to find a new home online, where they can experience liberty and freedom and the authentic America.

## The American Civil Religion

The co-option of the myth of America within the myth of the Internet emphasises the spiritual transcendence that accompanies national mythologies. The nation as an idea is the higher power, as it is capable of existing without a physical presence. By existing on and through the Internet, the myth of America suggests that our access to the transcendent is via technology; in this way, the Internet is situated as the gatekeeper to the divine. To consider what it means to shift to a technology-mediated concept of divinity, I turn here to the English writer Neil Gaiman's (2001) novel *American Gods*. In this novel – and its subsequent 2017 television adaptation – Gaiman describes an America that is at war with itself. Gaiman's America is one that is built upon faith,

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<sup>51</sup> Walt Hunter (2018) provides an insightful explanation of the Statue of Liberty's sonnet, "The New Colossus". Hunter describes how the sonnet was written by Emma Lazarus, an American Jew, in 1883, and that it is lines 9 and 10 that are the most well-known: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free". Hunter argues that the context of the sonnet is largely ignored and that the sonnet is in many ways a repudiation of national mythologies.

populated by the gods that early immigrants brought with them on their journey to the New World. It is also an America that is grappling with change; the immigrant gods, so many generations on, are forgotten as first-generation immigrants give way to subsequent generations, and old traditions begin to fade as new ones take their place. The reader accompanies Shadow Moon, Gaiman's ex-convict protagonist, as he takes a job with Mr Wednesday, the Norse god Odin in disguise. Shadow meets a pantheon of immigrant gods who are in their twilight years, largely ignored and cast aside by the time the novel takes place in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. He is also confronted by a range of new, technological gods who are worshipped by unknowing subjects, icons of an America that has built its own history and its own faiths. Shadow becomes a participant in the struggle between the two, watching the old gods struggle to stay relevant as the new gods gain more and more control. Gaiman's work suggests that we take our gods with us when we travel, but that our children will eventually create their own gods, gods that represent their new environment and the values that they have found therein. Faith does not disappear in Gaiman's America; it simply takes on a new form. The author questions who or what it is that we sacrifice to after our ancestral faiths are forgotten.

Gaiman suggests in his novel that faith and belief are part of the human condition, whether we acknowledge it or not. He suggests that even secularism is in itself a type of religious expression, drawing attention to the religiosity of the American experience in particular, showing that even where one does not expect it, gods exist<sup>52</sup>. He does this both narratively and textually, using quotes such as this one from the book *The American Joe Miller* (1865)<sup>53</sup> to begin each chapter:

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<sup>52</sup> A particular twist in the novel comes when Shadow discovers that the kind and genial old Mr Hinzemann, who helps him out during his stay in the icy town of Lakeside, Wisconsin, is in fact a kobold, a Germanic sprite. At the close of the book, Shadow learns that the children that had gone missing in Lakeside over the past 200 years were taken by Hinzemann as child sacrifices; he would repay their sacrifice by keeping the small town safe and economically viable (Gaiman 2001).

<sup>53</sup> Compiled by Robert Kempt, *The American Joe Miller: a collection of Yankee wit and humour* is a joke book that borrows its form from the 1739 British joke book, *Joe Miller's Jests*. The jokes in these books were allegedly the work of Joe

The boundaries of our country, sir? Why sir, on the north we are bounded by the Aurora Borealis, on the east we are bounded by the rising sun, on the south we are bounded by the procession of the Equinoxes, and on the west by the Day of Judgement. (Gaiman 2001, p. 3; Kempt 1865)

Through these quotes and the text more broadly, Gaiman locates his book within a tradition in search of understanding a particularly American religious identity<sup>54</sup>. The religious identity he examines is one that is complex and diverse, shared by gods of different traditional religions that, in general, coexist peacefully. The conflict that drives the plot forward is one of tradition in the face of modernity, in the face of globalisation and technological change. It is traditional religion set against an overarching American religion. The new gods that fill out the ranks of the novel are those such as Mr World, god of globalisation, Media, goddess of television and radio, and the Technical Boy, god of technology. The shift from old pagan gods such as Odin and Anubis – alongside a variety of mythical creatures such as Leprechauns – to these new gods characterises a cultural shift that has been considered within academic scholarship. Where Gaiman’s novel states that the immigrant gods have been “consigned to the Dumpster of history” (2001, p. 53), Will Herberg argues that “historical faiths” have been “[devitalized]” (1955/1960, p. 89) and Harold Bloom claims that America has “revised ... traditional religion” (1992, p. 44). Gaiman’s new gods are attempting a coup against the old gods in an attempt to universalise their electronic wonderland, pushing aside tradition for addiction, acceleration, and capitalism-induced mania. They co-opt traditional practices, modernising them; the Technical Boy, for example, smokes synthetic toad-skins in a bastardisation of a Mesoamerican practice (Carod-Artal 2015; Gaiman

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Miller, a theatre actor, although this in itself was part of the joke, as Miller notoriously lacked a sense of humour (Watkins 2014; Weiss 1943).

<sup>54</sup> Which in itself is interesting, as Gaiman is English not American. Gaiman gives an outsider account of American identity, however his book’s success and television adaptation suggest his account resonates with an American audience. Gaiman did however write the draft for *American Gods* while on a road trip across the United States, roughly eight years after he had moved to the country with his American wife (Gaiman 2011).

2001)<sup>55</sup>. The implicit religiosity represented by the new gods is not unlike the civil religion mentioned above; these new gods are unwittingly worshipped, providing a value system to a society that has broken its ties to tradition. They are a capitalist transcendence, a religion for the masses. They are what Bloom (1992) would call an American Religion.

In the words of Gaiman's upstart new god the Technical Boy, this American Religion, to borrow Bloom's term, is "an operating system" (Gaiman 2001, p. 54). It is not an explicit, traditional religion such as Catholicism. It instead operates beneath the social surface, providing signals that encourage specific behaviours. John Wilson makes a similar observation when he states that religion can be "comprehended as functioning to maintain a coherent society" and that, in this way, "cultural values [operate] as a religious framework" (1979, p. 157). This understanding of religion focuses "not so much on explicit rituals or beliefs" but rather on a coherent society that exists "because all members share a value set" (Wilson 1979, p. 157). This coherent society is a bounded society, as Charles Long notes when he claims that the American Religion "offers salvation" not "to all human beings regardless of circumstance" as traditional religions do, but that instead "salvation is seen in the context of belonging to the American national community" (1974, p. 212). Whilst this could be understood as an extreme nationalism rather than as a form of religion, Robert Bellah assures us that "the American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in light of ultimate and universal reality" (1967/1974, p. 40).

When this work on the civil religion is put in context, however, a different picture emerges. As discussed above, the idea of an American civil religion came out of a tumultuous period in the United States. The civil religion was an attempt to construct a national social covenant that could

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<sup>55</sup> In the television adaption, the Technical Boy smokes his synthetic toad skins through a vape pen. In the novel, he uses hand rolled cigarettes.

overcome the division that war and inequality had encouraged in society. In light of this, the “ultimate and universal reality” that Bellah speaks of is the White male reality, and the civil religion can be understood as a way to restore the power in that reality by retconning<sup>56</sup> it into the core of American history. Like any myth, it seeks to transform “petit bourgeois culture into a universal nature” (Barthes 1957/2012, p. ix), its intentions depoliticised through a language saturated in ideas of civility and unity. This is the language that is co-opted into the myth of the Internet by an Internet elite that is predominantly white and male, who in turn reinforce the White universal of the myth of America as they get framed as the epitome of contemporary American success.

The American Religion is a tool of domination presented as a universal belief system. That even today it serves as a touchstone for mainstream American identity, as shown by Gorman’s (2021) poem and Schiff’s (The Washington Post 2020) impeachment speech, is problematic. By going back to the work of scholars who were framing the idea of an American civil religion in the 1960s and 1970s, it is clear that the universal belief system that they propose is intended to be a White colonial Christian universal. It is generally agreed that Robert Bellah was the one to first develop the idea of an American civil religion<sup>57</sup> in his 1967 article, *Civil Religion in America* (1967/1974). Bellah was vague in his description; he claimed that there exists a “set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” (1967/1974, p. 24) that together form a civil religion in American life. However, he never clarifies just what these are. Bellah focuses on President Kennedy’s inaugural address in 1961, pointing out the three places where Kennedy invokes God during his short speech and concluding that despite a commitment to the separation of church and state, a religious

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<sup>56</sup> Retcon, short for retroactive continuity, is a literary device where an author makes changes to a narrative so as to make it fit with a new idea. The term *retroactive continuity* is generally believed to have come from the work of Baptist theologian Frank Tupper in 1973. Tupper claims that “retroactive continuity ultimately means that history flows fundamentally from the future into the past” (1974, p. 100). It is a key feature in mainstream comic books, often allowing for new backstories to be created for already existing characters.

<sup>57</sup> The idea of a civil religion more generally pre-dates Bellah, originating in the work of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau (1762/1968) wrote of a social contract that would allow a civil society to exist in a way that benefitted both the individual and the society.

element still exists within the nation's politics. He claims that this religious element is embedded in American life, heavily reliant on narratives that are biblical and Christian, leading him to speculate on whether an agnostic or atheist could ever be an American president<sup>58</sup>. He suggests that if that were ever the case, there may be “consequences perhaps of liberal alienation and of fundamentalist ossification” (Bellah 1967/1974, p. 37); perhaps it is fortunate then that there has never been a firm and open non-believer as President<sup>59</sup> (Masci 2017). Despite the connection to God and Christianity, Bellah provides little detail as to what the American civil religion looks like. He claims that “it is useless to speculate on the form such a civil religion might take” (1967/1974, p. 40), though at the same time he assures his readers that there are “common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share” (1967/1974, p. 24) and that this will not change. He universalises the Christian faith and suggests that the American civil religion is modelled on it.

The lack of detail in Bellah's work has been thoroughly critiqued; Charles Long, for instance, takes aim at Bellah's ambiguity, arguing that American “‘civil religion’ is an exceedingly vague phrase” (1974, p. 211), questioning “what is meant by ‘American’ and ‘religion’” in this phrase (1974, p. 212). For Long, the lack of precision delegitimises Bellah's concept, as it is difficult to identify any instance of civil religion in a society accurately. In questioning the reality of Bellah's civil religion, Long critiques the way it operates as a hegemonic normative narrative; he calls for the inclusion of non-white and non-protestant elements in our understanding of the civil religion so as to ensure it more accurately reflects the diversity of the United States. Long suggests that there still is a core American identity, just that we have yet to formulate it sufficiently.

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<sup>58</sup> Kennedy was the first Catholic President. The current President, Joe Biden, is only the second.

<sup>59</sup> This cannot simply be put down to coincidence either, as a Pew Research Center report in 2020 claims that half of all Americans believe that their President should have *strong* religious beliefs (see Fahmy 2020).

John Wilson is more agreeable to Bellah's claims than Long, though he still remains cautious. He claims that whilst

it cannot be established that there is a particular closed set of beliefs at the center of a manifest religion of the society, it may be proposed that there is, nonetheless, an open set or cluster of meanings central to American culture. The particular symbols in this set are numerous, to some extent they are diffuse, and certainly they repeatedly undergo transformations. But the overall set is identifiably American, and the Americanness lies in the constellation more than in the separate elements. (1979, p. 117)

Wilson turns back to Will Herberg's work seminal 1955 work, *Protestant – Catholic – Jew* (1955/1960), for a clearer understanding of what that constellation of meanings might be. Despite pre-dating Bellah's original civil religion article, Wilson argues that Herberg is working on similar questions as Bellah and is more conclusive as to how an American civil religion would look. He claims that Herberg has uncovered what could be considered a "set of values basic to the American social order" (Wilson 1979, p. 159). Herberg's 1955 work was undertaken in response to the sociologist Robin Williams' 1951 declaration that "every functioning society has to an important degree a common religion. The possession of a common set of ideas, rituals, and symbols can supply an overarching sense of unity even in a society riddled with realistic conflicts" (Williams 1951, p. 312). When Herberg questioned what it was that provided American society with an "overarching sense of unity," he decided that "a realistic appraisal of the values, ideas, and behaviour of the American people leads to the conclusion that Americans, by and large, find this 'common religion' in the system familiarly known as the American Way of Life" (1974, p. 77). This American Way of Life serves a purpose much the same as a traditional religion, blurring the lines between what can be considered religious and secular behaviours:

There is to be found among Americans some sort of faith or belief or set of convictions, not generally designated as religion but definitely operative as such in their lives in the sense of providing them with some fundamental context of normativity and meaning. (Herberg 1955/1960, pp. 73 - 74)

By the time Herberg wrote *Protestant – Catholic – Jew*, he had undergone a conservative turn in his political philosophy. Until at least the mid-1940s, Herberg had associated himself with communist groups within the United States, often serving on editorial boards and as a writer for communist newspapers. Dismayed at some of the practices of labour unions and their increasingly bureaucratic organising, Herberg posited religious communities as an example of a moral framework from which to reconsider social relations (Herberg 1943). As such, his interpretation of the American Way of Life is grounded in neoconservative religious ideals.

In *Protestant – Catholic – Jew* (1955/1960), Herberg analyses what he considered to be the three major faith groups of the United States: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. After examining each of these faiths, Herberg argues that what they represent are Americanised versions of religions brought to America from Europe. The European religions are assimilated and contextualised, changed to fit with American values, aspirations, and politics. Herberg emphasises that the Americanness of the religions he examines changes them in important ways, primarily regarding their relationship with one another. For example, Herberg claims that Catholicism in America has no issue with considering itself as a denomination; this stands in contrast to Catholicism in Europe, which he claims to consider itself to be “the one true church” (Herberg 1955/1960, p. 86). Herberg believes this approach results from and is evidence of the denominational pluralism encultured within the American Way of Life, encouraged by First Amendment freedoms. The American Religion acts as a big tent religion under which all others shelter. The idea of denominational pluralism is examined further in Sidney Mead’s 1967 essay, “The ‘Nation with the Soul of a Church’” (1967/1974), where Mead terms this denominational pluralism ‘desectarianism’. Desectarianism suggests that no particular denomination – or sect – is given prominence or priority, contrasted against the term secular, which suggests existing outside of religion and religious authority. Both Mead and Herberg place this desectarianism / denominational pluralism at the heart of the American Way of Life, as a central tenet of American values that is enshrined in the nation’s first constitutional amendment. Herberg comes to the



conclusion that this denominational pluralism has transformed Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism into “three diverse, but equally legitimate, equally American, expressions of an over-all American religion, standing for essentially the same ‘moral ideals’ and spiritual values” (1955/1960, p. 87). It is the moral ideals and spiritual values that, for Herberg, make up the American Way of Life rather than a particular interpretation of God. In its universalising, Herberg’s arguments place America as a nation as the replacement for God; it is from the internal nation that morals and values come from, rather than from somewhere or someone external. This deification of the nation internalises the transcendent power; Americans are thus, in this telling, answerable only to America. In the myth of the Internet, this is co-opted, and the Internet becomes the site of internalised transcendent power; in response a carnivalistic reading of the Internet suggests we ask who are we as users answerable to, the Internet elite or ourselves?

Where Bellah’s work was vague and ambiguous, Herberg provides details of the values he believes make up the American Way of Life. He borrows from the work of Dorothy Fisher, who in her book *Vermont Tradition: The Biography of an Outlook on Life* (1953), discusses Protestant characteristics that Herberg believes can be expanded further than Vermont to the entire country: “individual freedom, personal independence, human dignity, community, responsibility, social and political democracy, sincerity, restraint in outward conduct, and thrift” (Herberg 1955/1960, p. 80). Herberg continues with this line of argument throughout his work, stating in 1974 that

the basic ethos of America’s civil religion is quite familiar: the American Way is dynamic; optimistic; pragmatic; individualistic; egalitarian, in the sense of feeling uneasy at any overtly manifested mark of the inequalities endemic in our society as in every other society; and pluralistic, in the sense of being impatient with the

attempt of any movement, cause, or institution to take in ‘too much ground,’ as the familiar phrase has it. (1974, p. 79)<sup>60</sup>

Herberg’s use of Fisher here shows that he very much believes that Protestantism has been the most influential religion on the national character. He says as much in *Protestant – Catholic – Jew*, emphasising the celebration of pluralism that occurs within America and argues that this pluralism is the result of American Protestantism, a “kind of secularized Puritanism [...] without sin or judgement” (1955/1960, p. 81). The distaste for abusive, totalising control that Herberg locates within the American Way of Life is emphasised within the myth of America; it ties the celebration of pluralism to a historical narrative of Puritan settlers travelling to the New World to escape the oppressive rule of the Church, suggesting that the one necessarily led to the other. This is a determinist history, a singular trajectory in which the Internet elite have placed the Internet as the latest step.

The emphasis Herberg and Bellah both give to biblical religions within their conceptualisations of the American civil religion articulates an understanding of America as foremost a Christian nation, despite its supposed desectarianism. The prominence given to Christian, and particularly Protestant, values within the American civil religion is bound to a mythologised history of the nation, a history that is highly selective and simplified to the degree that it appears natural and that it “goes without saying” (Barthes 1957/2012, p. 256). The Protestant and Puritan origin story imagines American colonists fleeing oppression and creating a better, brighter new world. In these stories, the historical narrative is straightforward: fleeing

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<sup>60</sup> By the time he pens the 1974 piece, Herberg has established himself as a neo-conservative thinker. The realities of his conservative thought show through in the quote above; where he claims that the American Way is “impatient with the attempt of any movement, cause, or institution to take in ‘too much ground’”, it is easy to see this as a reflection on the civil rights movement of the time. Herberg universalises white capitalist values in his work. The impatience he describes here can be read as impatience with oppressed minorities wanting too much change, which would upset the balance of the values he clearly prizes. Too much disruption is anti-American, Herberg suggests, and so long as the oppression is not “overtly manifested,” it is not really something about which to get worked up. For Herberg, the whole is worth more than the sum of its parts: the nation is worth more than the individual citizens that dwell within it. This charge of implicit racism in Herberg’s ideas is not a one-time incident; in 1965, Herberg published an article decrying the civil rights movement more directly (Herberg, 1965).

persecution from King Charles in England, Protestant colonists believed that North America could rejuvenate the Protestant project and allow them space and freedom to worship as they saw fit. England had supposedly failed in its duties; Protestant reformers had believed that England would be “God’s chosen instrument within the scheme of universal redemption” (Wilson 1979, pp. 33 - 34), but saw instead their England drifting quickly back towards Rome and the Catholic Church. In contrast to an England and Europe that were “despoiled, damned, and doomed” (Greene 1993, p. 38), the New World was imagined as a land of plenty where “the deer were tamer and more plentiful than prostitutes in London” (Bercovitch 1975, p. 137). Colonists in this story apparently conceived of the New World as “the third, and presumably last, Israel following England’s faithlessness” (Wilson 1979, p. 35). The search for a better place underscores this narrative, a continual yearning for perfection. The Old Testament of the Bible is important to this telling of American history, as it allows for the United States to exist as a land promised to the pilgrims by God, a divine gift that cannot be challenged. Philip Gorski explains this tendency to characterise the United States as a nation built on the Old Testament and a covenant theory to be a type of “white Christian nationalism” (Gorski 2010, 2017, 2020). Gorski argues that Christian nationalism gives the American myth an apocalyptic and sacrificial flavour; Christian nationalism turns the social covenant in Winthrop’s city on a hill speech into something violent and bloody where the sanctity of the nation is proven on the battlefield. The dead American soldiers of World War II in this context become martyrs, the success of the United States in the war proof that their deaths satisfied God and renewed the American covenant. For Gorski, this explains the reverence given to the military by many Americans, as it legitimates for those same Americans the United States’ continual foray into foreign wars; the American army is cast as the righteous sword of God and to be martyred is to die for a holy mission. Of course, Gorski notes that a lot of this language has become secularised and “euphemistic,” changing from talking about martyrs and blood conquest to those who give the “ultimate sacrifice” and to a “Judeo-Christian tradition” (2017, p. 341). He traces this shift to the presidency of Reagan and the decades of “American

exceptionalism” Reagan inspired (Gorski 2020). Gorski contends that the violent ideas still exist below the surface, however, and that they occasionally flare up, as, for example, with President Trump’s white supremacist rhetoric (Gorski 2017).

Gorski (2017) argues that Trump's success lies with his ability to relate the violent ideas to popular culture, rather than explicitly to the Christian narratives from which they initially arose. As Mark Anderson shows, Trump deftly utilised popular American tropes to his advantage:

He cast his run for the presidency in the shape of an old-fashioned captivity narrative. He averred that American innocence and virtue were under assault, presenting himself as the hero of the narrative he spun; did he not suggest that he was going to rescue America and, ‘make it great again’? Further, mirroring the captivity tale, Trump identified Others – Blacks (generally, but also specifically, President Barack Obama), Mexicans (smeared as ‘rapists’ and ‘drug dealers’), and Muslims (just get rid of them!) as enemies, much like earlier generations imagined Indians or Japanese. Further, Trump suggested that American goodness and decency had been stolen away by this same cast of dusky characters in a kind of symbolic attempted raping of American chastity.

And so Trump likewise cast himself in the role of redeemer, recapitulating the larger frontier myth for which the captivity narrative provided a blueprint.

(Anderson 2017, p. 44)

Anderson argues that the captivity narrative was important to early understandings of the western frontier. The frontier narrative is perhaps best explained by Richard Slotkin (1973), who examines narratives where Indigenous American populations were cast as dangerous villains, seeking to rape and murder settlers, and the western frontiersman was seen as the valiant hero, providing civility and protection in a lawless land. Within Christian nationalism, the frontiersman becomes God’s faithful servant, righteous in his violence against the non-believer. By presenting himself as that western frontiersman, Trump was able to update and secularise the violence and blood narratives of the Old Testament for our contemporary times. Anderson makes the same connections between Trump’s use of popular tropes and Christian narratives that Gorski does, claiming that

“Trump is that particular kind of hero-redeemer, a mashup of Christianity’s Adam, Moses, and Jesus characters, noted alternatively for birthing, rebirthing and leading God’s own favorite children from misery to the promised land” (2017, p. 44). Thus Trump exemplifies the weaving together of narratives that create the myth of America, combining popular tropes, such as the frontier, with a white Christian nationalism. He presents himself as doing God’s work and relies upon a belief that because something is sanctioned by God, it is intentional, inevitable. Trump ties himself to a historical trajectory that predates the United States, fashioning himself as its heir apparent. In his brashness and impious behaviour, he plays the part of a new saviour, an American demi-god, whilst continuing to hold up the structures of the past. Trump’s dependence on Twitter shows how the Internet facilitates this narrative, bringing the righteous frontier into the digital age.

## Technological Salvation

As noted, the myth of the Internet emphasises the connection between spiritual transcendence and national mythology. This is not something new; within the myth of America, technology has always played an important role in the nation’s relationship to the divine. The Internet intensifies this relationship, however, by adding the possibility of immaterial existence and connection. Before moving on to an examination of the myth of the Internet in the next chapter, I turn here to consider the broader place of technology within the myth of America.

In July 1969, the world watched as the crew from Apollo 11 landed on the moon, as Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made that “giant leap for [human] kind” that has been indelibly etched in our collective memory. The moment was a triumph for the United States, allowing them to flaunt their technological prowess over the Soviet Union. The Soviets may have put the first man in orbit, but the Americans were the first to put a man on the moon. The United States flag was

planted on the lunar surface, an ongoing claim of success, victory, and American exceptionalism<sup>61</sup>. As this event is mythologised over time through cinema, music, and various other media, we have understandably focused more on some aspects of it than we have on others. We hold onto Armstrong's words and the idea and images of astronauts bouncing across the moon's surface, freed from Earth's gravity. We hold onto the dream of going beyond what we know, the wonder and mystery of the stars. We hold onto the power of the rockets and the scientific genius of those who made them. However, we often leave out the fact that Aldrin, a devoted Presbyterian, took communion before leaving Earth and again whilst on the moon (Noble 1997; Wilson 1984). Aldrin's actions made communion elements the first food and liquid that anyone had ever consumed on the moon's surface, and his reading of biblical passages highlight a religiosity that is often left out of scientific narratives. The relationship between early space missions and Christianity is complex, however, and Aldrin is hardly an outlier; a television broadcast of the previous Apollo 8 mission featured the astronauts, Bill Anders, Jim Lovell, and Frank Borman, collectively reading from the book of Genesis and invoking a blessing from God (Oliver 2013). In reflecting on his mission, Borman has claimed that being in space provided him with "evidence that God lives" (quoted in Noble 1997, p. 138). This connection between space and faith manifests not only in the astronauts but also in the engineering teams involved in the construction of rockets: after multiple failures of the Vanguard rocket in the late 1950s, engineers attached a St. Christopher medallion to the rocket's guidance system; on official paperwork, this was signed off by official personnel as the "addition of divine guidance" (quoted in Noble 1997, p. 136). The importance of

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<sup>61</sup> Though the flag planted during the Apollo 11 mission likely fell over when the astronauts left the lunar surface, as Aldrin has claimed he saw it fall and high resolution images of the landing site do not show signs of a flag (Moskowitz 2012). Other flags planted during subsequent Apollo missions have been spotted in high resolution images as still standing, however scientific consensus argues that the cheap nylon flags could not have survived the conditions on the moon, and that if any still remain they will have been bleached white by radiation (Fincannon 2012; Welsh 2012). Interestingly enough, there is currently a Chinese flag on the moon, planted during an unmanned mission in late 2020 (BBC 2020). The Chinese flag has been given some protection from the elements in recognition of the fate of the United States flags.

divine guidance can be seen echoed in public sentiment; NASA received at least eight million signatures between 1969 and 1975 arguing that astronauts such as Borman should be permitted freedom of religious expression whilst in space, a response to Madalyn Murray O'Hair's<sup>62</sup> civil lawsuit against NASA on the grounds that the Christian displays on Apollo 8 were unconstitutional (Oliver 2013; Wilson 1984). Whilst this could be an instance of championing the rights of religious freedom, it is telling that at least a quarter of these signatures were the result of campaigning by the Family Radio Network, who informed listeners that space missions "[could] only be successful if [they had] God's approval and if [they were] kept in a right relationship to God" (quoted in Oliver 2013, p. 120). Our common narrative of the moon landing and space travel often forgets these details; it has evolved within our collective consciousness largely as a secular narrative, distancing science and technology from any notion of God.

The secular narrative that separates science and technology from God arises out of Enlightenment thinking and a fundamentalist impetus towards empirical rationality. Within this narrative, science and God are positioned as a dualism. The theologian Lloyd Geering claims that this dualism largely arises out of a juxtaposition between evolution and creationism, as a belief that "either the religious tradition [is] true or else science, but not both" (Geering 1985, p. 5). The incompatibility of these positions has been thoroughly debated in the public sphere, which in a cyclical manner further reinforces the belief that science and God are opposed (see for example: Boyle 2014; Larson 1998; Larson 1985; Lienesch 2007; Supreme Court of United States 1968; United States District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania 2005). Famed public scientist Bill Nye has gone so far as to claim that teaching children creationism rather than evolution is a danger to our collective future, as he believes that it will stop children from wanting to explore scientific ideas and from creating scientific knowledge (Big Think 2012). Whilst Nye does not go

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<sup>62</sup> O'Hair had been one of the leading plaintiffs in the 1963 Supreme Court Case that had seen prayer and bible readings banned from American public schools (Oliver 2013).

so far as to claim that science and religion are entirely incompatible, in his arguments he draws on a common schema where science is prioritised over religion, where religion is considered a personal conviction and science is considered empirical fact. NASA's treatment of Aldrin's desire to express his faith on-board Apollo 11 exemplifies this schema; Aldrin was advised by Deke Slayton, who ran Apollo's crew operations, to take communion so long as it was not publicly broadcast so as to avoid any potential controversy, such as that dragged up by O'Hair after the Apollo 8 mission (Cresswell 2012; Oberhaus 2019).

The secular narrative of science and technology is, of course, not as far removed from religious narratives as public scientists such as Bill Nye suggest, however. Both view the religious side of the dualism as traditional. Gorski (2010, pp. 10 - 11) argues that, regarding traditions, both the secular and religious positions can be considered fundamentalist, as the dualism between the two presents traditions as

static and unchanging. [The traditions] are rooted in a singular moment of revelation whose ultimate significance is final and transparent. Let us call this the 'fundamentalist' view, since it is espoused by religious and secular fundamentalists, both of whom define tradition in opposition to modernity and reason (Harris 2004; Dawkins 2006; Marsden 2006; Hitchens 2007; Gorski 2009).

[...]

For religious nationalists, to say that something is 'traditional' is ipso facto to commend it. For liberal secularists, by contrast, it is to condemn it.

Both see tradition as something historical, whether that be for the better or the worst. Gorski suggests that instead, we need to adopt a third position, one where traditions are considered to be "dynamic and evolving" (2010, p. 11). He argues that by doing so, we allow for traditions to be reinterpreted and adapted to the contexts of time and place. This opens space for science and technology, and religion to be seen as symbiotic rather than necessarily divergent.



This notion of science and technology and religion as symbiotic is hardly new. Margaret Wertheim (1995) argues that themes within religious narratives are often repeated within secular scientific narratives. For example, the claim that developed within the 19<sup>th</sup> century that science and technology can lead to some form of human salvation is much the same as the claim that prayer and devotion can lead to religious salvation. Mary Midgley makes a similar argument, claiming that the idea that science can be a stand-in for religious salvation is an “ancient and powerful” idea (Midgley 1992, p. 1). The notion of scientific progress has also been claimed to have religious roots, such as Paul Tillich’s argument that the claim of moving “from a less satisfactory situation to a more satisfactory situation” is a religious claim, linked to the idea of God’s promise of a better life (Tillich 1988, p. 84). There is also a long tradition of science and technology being understood as tools for religious ends; Frank Borman’s comments about travelling to space as proving to him that God exists is but one example of this tradition. George Ovitt Jr. (1987) claims that during the Middle Ages, there existed a belief that scientific inquiry was the investigation of God’s pure form. By studying nature, scientists were studying God’s work. During this time, the development of technology was encouraged by the Church, as it provided the “material means” for that investigation (Ovitt Jr. 1987, p. 123). For those in the Middle Ages, science was a way to understand and commune with God (Noble 1997; White Jr. 1978). This attitude continues today (Peacocke 2001; Ward 1998); Jennifer Wiseman, an American astrophysicist, for instance, claims that “by studying more of nature you’re ... enriching your understanding of God” (quoted in Salleh 2018), and Iranian physicist Medhi Golshani claims that scientific research is important because it “reveals more of the wonders of God’s creation” (quoted in Begley 1998). The mutual exclusivity suggested by the dualism between science and religion is challenged by such claims, as in these instances, science is understood to facilitate belief rather than being somehow beyond it.

Within the myth of America, the idea of using science and technology to understand and know God reimagines science and technology as tools of salvation. The myth of America posits that the American relationship with God is unique, special, but also that it is something that must

be uncovered. The relationship lies dormant within the American population, God's chosen people, and once one understands it, they can be saved (Bloom 1992). Commentators on the American religion claim that not only is the American relationship with God unique, but the American God is also unique as well (Bloom 1992; Davis 1998; Prothero 2003). In the American narrative, God the Father is replaced by Jesus the Son, and it is Jesus who takes centre stage in American life. This is not the Jesus of the Old World or of the Bible; this "Americanised" Jesus is relatable and identifiable, rather than distinct from humanity. Stephen Prothero, when discussing the American Jesus Christ, consciously refers to him as Jesus rather than Christ:

I use the name *Jesus* here advisedly, since my focus is on Jesus the person, not Christ the theological sign. It is common to refer to 'Jesus Christ' as if Jesus were his given name and Christ his surname. But Christ, of course, is a title: the English equivalent of the Greek term (*kristos*) for Messiah. To invoke Jesus Christ, therefore, is not simply to name a person but to affirm that person's status as the liberator long awaited by the Jewish people. (Prothero 2003, p. 9, emphasis in original)

Prothero argues that the American Jesus is not necessarily a historical or theological figure but rather a cultural one. He tracks various incarnations of this Jesus throughout various cultural and religious segments of the United States population. This Jesus represents a personal, individualised Jesus, a saviour who is human before he is divine. According to Prothero, this incarnation of Jesus is born from a cultural disenchantment with churches and organised religion, as well as with an inerrant bible. We can understand the separation of Jesus from these things as a consequence of the American context; it epitomises the individual relationship with the divine emphasised through the Protestant Reformation and takes it further, situating a personal Jesus as the only power to which one can be answerable. The trope of Americans as wary of too much outside interference in how they live their lives is on display here, and it highlights a belief that the individual knows what is best for themselves. These beliefs run through the myth of America, emphasising a theme of sovereignty of the individual over their own lives; this sovereignty is supposedly universal, but

as with most of the features of the myth of America, it remains accessible to only a select few: those who have accepted the American Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour. The myth of the Internet adds a further caveat to this: the saviour has gone digital, and to reach him, you have to as well.

The humanisation of Jesus centres Jesus within the American narrative. Jesus becomes co-conspirator, giving the individual access to the secrets of God; he is “the resurrected friend, walking and talking one-on-one, with the repentant sinner” (Bloom 1992, p. 65). This is the Jesus of the cult film *Dogma* (Smith 1999), introduced by the character Cardinal Glick as part of the fictional Catholic Church’s attempt to rebrand and update their image in America:

Glick: Thank you, thank you, thank you. Now we all know how the majority and the media in this country view the Catholic Church. They think of us as a passé, archaic institution. People find the Bible obtuse... even hokey. Now in an effort to disprove all that the Church has appointed this year as a time of renewal... both of faith and of style. For example, the crucifix. While it has been a time honoured symbol of our faith, Holy Mother Church has decided to retire this highly recognizable, yet wholly depressing, image of our Lord crucified. Christ didn’t come to Earth to give us the willies... He came to help us out. He was a booster. And it is with that take on our Lord in mind that we’ve come up with a new, more inspiring sigil. So it is with great pleasure that I present you with the first of many revamps the ‘Catholicism WOW’ campaign will unveil over the next year. I give you... The Buddy Christ. Now that’s not the sanctioned term we’re using for the symbol, just something we’ve been kicking around the office, but look at it. Doesn’t it... pop? Buddy Christ...

Here Glick pulls a sheet off a larger-than-life statue of Jesus. This Jesus has an exaggerated grin and winks, with one hand pointing out to the crowd and the other flashing a thumbs up. He is an American Jesus through and through, a friend to the people, no longer nailed to a crucifix but welcoming and encouraging. The individual’s personal relationship with Jesus has become important, rather than the belief that Jesus died for humanity’s sins. This personal relationship materialises across religious engagement in America; the invocation of televangelists for people to

accept Jesus as their *personal* saviour, for instance, highlights a shift towards a cultural belief in *solus Jesus* – salvation through Jesus alone (Bloom 1992; Harvey 2010; Prothero 2003).

This American Jesus, as a personal saviour, a friend, a buddy, is made relatable across various audiences. The American Jesus is white and protestant, he is black, he is Buddhist (Prothero 2003). He is whatever and whomever the individual needs him to be to provide them with their salvation. This is the transcendence of the myth of America, ambiguous enough to be available to anyone. What the American Jesus ultimately represents, then, is the self. Prothero argues that the American Jesus is a “chameleon” (2003, p. 8), “lacking any core sense of self” (2003, p. 294). This leaves him open to interpretation, effectively a mirror onto which individuals can project their own values, beliefs, and goals. The American Jesus is a personalised connection to the divine, a spiritual encounter more than a religious one, which defies all outside authority. In the myth of the Internet, the Internet becomes a direct line to this American Jesus, accessible to anyone, at any time, from anywhere.

Science and technology can thus be understood not simply as a way to know and understand God, but also as a way to know and understand the self. The American Jesus is internalised, and the individual becomes as Jesus, as God. This is a gnostic understanding of the divine: it draws on a belief in the inherent divinity of humans, the belief that there exists within each of us a divine spark. Harold Bloom (1992) has written at length on the Gnosticism buried within American culture, arguing that the American self is a trapped self, and that with the right knowledge, it can be free. Bloom argues that the American Jesus is a response to American conditions, that he represents “an inward grace that traumatically put away frontier loneliness and instead put on the doctrine of experience that exalted such loneliness into a being-alone-with-Jesus” (1992, p. 63). This is Johnny Cash’s (1991) cowboy Jesus, out on the frontier providing settlers with a path to Heaven. It is the Jesus of knowledge, who can lead the way to salvation, and can also share it with the individual along the journey. Bloom argues that knowledge is central to Gnosticism, as it is knowledge of humankind’s innate divinity that will set us free.

As Erik Davis (1998) claims, science and technology can be used to provide us with that knowledge. We can find the internal Jesus, the internal knowledge of our divinity, and become once more gods in our own right. Davis argues that Americans, in particular, are in a prime position to uncover this knowledge, as the American settlers “reimagined the harsh and monumental landscape of the [Western Frontier] as an Old Testament desert where covenants could be restored and a new purchase made on a fallen world” (1998, p. 107). Through the imagined frontier, they created for themselves a space wherein “the American self could remake and rediscover its longed-for-origins” (1998, p. 106), a return to the divine life humanity lived before being cast to Earth by the Gnostic demiurge. Thus understood, the frontier becomes a space to recover the divine spark within each of us. Davis argues that technology can relocate this frontier and shift it beyond the geographical confines of the United States; in Davis’ understanding, the material world becomes a prison for our divine selves and through technology, we are able to move beyond it. We see this belief play out whenever we look to Elon Musk and his missions to Mars, his way to reject the troubles of our material world – economic, political, social, and above all ecological. We see it when individuals such as Sam Altman<sup>63</sup> funnel money into projects to digitise the self, seeking to discard the material body for a life lived in a virtual world (Hern 2018). Both Musk and Altman endeavour to overcome physical limitations and create a new world; they are attempting to be as God, showing that rather than being made in his image, we are instead equal to him. Through this projection of the divine beyond the borders of the United States, the American experience and the American Jesus are universalised, accessible to anyone. By taking up the American technologies that give us access to our divine spark, our inner selves, we become localised expressions of techno-Americans, a type of spiritualised cyborg, and, by default, companions in their mythical historical narrative towards paradise.

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<sup>63</sup> Altman is the founder of Y Combinator, a popular source of seed funding for digital start-ups.

The myth of America is an ambiguous line of defence for the titans that currently dominate our digital landscape. It is an image of unity and destiny that does not actually exist, and yet it remains a powerful narrative in the minds of many of the cultural, economic, and political leaders both inside and outside of the United States. The imagery that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s of an American history that stretched back to the Puritans has become commonplace within American life; Reagan's invocation of a shining city on the hill ushered in a renewed sense of American exceptionalism that has continued to justify and legitimate the foreign and domestic policy of the United States. However, it is the exceptionalism of a White America, a nationalism that has stoked division and violence in the name of a higher power. In the American cultural and political landscape, that higher power becomes a societally-reflective Jesus, allowing the American to see themselves as creator and judge, working in Jesus' name.

This mythic America is alluded to as the "real" America, an authenticity that has been buried under decades of history but remains at the heart of the nation. This makes it conservative and exposes a belief in an unchanging essence, where Americans today imagine they still worship the same God they did when they arrived in North America. History and tradition become a signal of legitimacy; it is the essence of America that is appealed to, and it largely goes unacknowledged how this essence has been socio-historically shaped.

What the myth of the Internet offers, then, is the ability to understand the authentic America. It is a tool through which God can be known, and through which God can be worshipped. It is the American God, the American Jesus, who occupies the altar, however, and the Internet becomes a way to know and to worship the self. By exploiting the myth of America, the Internet elite are able to co-opt its values and its legitimacy, arguing that they too just want what is best for the American people. As their companies spread around the globe, they become the fulfilment of the promises of the myth of America, a shining example of American exceptionalism and entrepreneurialism for the whole world to see. Within the American narrative,

these companies are the inevitable outcome of the American experience, and their success is the success of all Americans. For the United States government to censor these massive digital companies is then, in effect, to censor America itself. As these companies export the myth of America to the rest of the world and we all become “imaginary Americans” (Fiedler 1975), it will grow more and more difficult for other countries to regulate them as well<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> Some of the recent attempts to regulate the Internet by other countries were discussed in fn. 22. These include recent moves to charge digital companies for hosting Australian news media content on their platforms has lead the United States to inform Australia that to go through with the proposed regulations risked Australia experiencing “harmful outcomes” (Wahlquist 2021). Similar issues have occurred with the UK’s move to add tax to digital services, causing the United States to threaten higher tariffs on export goods in retaliation (Inman 2021).

## Two: The Myth of the Internet

“It’s obvious now that what we did was a fiasco, so let me remind you that  
what we wanted to do was something brave and noble.”

– Ethan Zuckerman, early Internet pioneer (quoted in Taplin 2017, p. 20)

The myth of the Internet is, to borrow a phrase from Herbert Butterfield, a “quest for origins” (Butterfield 1931, p. 43). It exists as a linear historical narrative with a fixed beginning that supposedly explains and justifies the behaviours of digital technologists in the present; in this way, it is modelled on scientific narratives of progress and evolution, where one thing inevitably leads to another in a rational and logical timeline. Of course, as has been emphasised throughout this thesis, the myth is simply one telling of the narrative. The myth of the Internet is but one origin story amongst many<sup>65</sup>. There is a strong bias in this myth towards the work of white American

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<sup>65</sup> As mentioned throughout this thesis, the myth of the Internet is a myth of affect rather than a critical and technical history. There is an impressive range of academic and technical literature that tell a more nuanced, historically accurate origin of the internet, but that origin is not the focus of this particular piece of work as it is not an origin the majority of Internet users engage with. As stated in the introduction, there are various reasons for this, not limited to the literature existing behind paywalls, the literature being too dense with technical jargon for the average reader to understand, and a simple lack of interest on the part of users; we are less interested in how it works, just that it does. The central questions of this thesis also differ from the academic and technical literature, as it is a question of digital carnival and the way that a myth of the Internet leads us into that carnival.

Nonetheless, I recognise that some readers may be seeking a critique of the effect of the Internet, of the ways that the underpinning technological mechanisms shape and limit our engagement with digital technology, and how the social make up of Internet companies further entrenches existing social biases into our society. This type of socio-technical critique argues in favour of a social constructivist understanding of technology and the Internet, positioned against a technological determinist perspective, where technology is understood as the result of human actions, decisions, and contexts (Bijker et al. 2012; Feenberg 1999). As it is socially constructed, so it is socially malleable (Marx & Smith 1994). On the one hand, this offers the opportunity to effect the technology democratically, creating something for the benefit of all; on the other hand, it also offers the opportunity to impose upon the technology the intentions and goals of particular social groups. It is in this ability that existing social biases are perpetuated, as those with enough capital – political, social, economic – are able to overwhelm democratic intentions in favour of their own. This is why the creation of the Internet and technology more broadly exist as male-dominated spaces, with the achievements and innovations made by women largely pushed aside and co-opted by men (Abbate 1999, 2012; Ensmenger 2010; Hicks 2017). Similar impositions have been made on the technology by private capital and neoliberalisation, where the interests of investors and other wealthy individuals have been deemed the highest priority, resulting in exploitative platforms that care more about data than users (Pasquale 2016; Piketty 2014; Zuboff 2019). This decision to favour private capital shrouds government involvement in the creation and shaping of the



men. The individuals who are glorified within this myth are discussed in such a way that they seemingly constitute an “ideal type”<sup>66</sup> (Weber 1904/2012, p. 125) of digital technologist, one who is intelligent, innovative, and rebellious. This ideal type of digital technologist exists within the myth of the Internet as an ahistorical figure, an Enlightenment-esque hero who is able to use their unique genius to bring the world one step closer to the future. This is a future that is always deferred, always in the process of becoming; this is used to justify the rise of newer technologists to continue, and outdo, the work of their predecessors.

The cast of characters who appear throughout the myth, which spans over half a century, is relatively small. Little is said about the armies of computer programmers who build and refine the internet, making it accessible for public consumption. Given equally little consideration is where the money for these armies come from. Publicly well-known digital technology investors have been part of successful digital technology companies themselves, such as Peter Thiel and Marc Andreessen, further reinforcing the idea of the internet being constructed by a small and exclusive cohort. The myth of the Internet provides a type of romanticised mysticism around this core set of individuals and the creation of the internet itself; it presents the Internet as the realm of benevolent geniuses who toil to bring us all closer to utopia. At its most basic, the myth of the

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Internet, and conceals the deliberate choice of efficiency over social consequences (Agar 2003; Ceruzzi 2012; Columbia 2009).

The social construction of technology allows for these inequities and biases to be challenged, however. Many of those critiquing technology and the Internet do so in order to call attention to the possibilities of change and position technology as an avenue for broader social changes (Stiegler 2019; Winner 2020). In these socio-technical critiques, there is a desire for structural change that does not necessarily filter down into the everyday Internet use of the average individual. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the average user is more interested in whether or not a digital service works, rather than what broader social impacts the technology has beyond their own personal social experience. There is a general acknowledgment of the issues raised by these socio-technical critiques – the success of Charles Brooker’s (2011) anthology series *Black Mirror*, for instance, highlights a cultural awareness of the darker parts of technology – however, as I argue in this thesis, for the average user, the myth of the Internet and the digital carnival keep those critiques as background noise.

<sup>66</sup>“... a one-sided *accentuation* of *one* or *a number of* viewpoints and through the synthesis of a great many diffuse and discrete *individual* phenomena (more present in one place, fewer in another, and occasionally completely absent), which are in conformity with those one-sided, accentuated viewpoints, into an internally consistent *mental* image. In its conceptual purity, this mental image cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality” (Weber 1904/2012, p. 125, emphasis in original).

Internet argues that the internet exists as evidence of the unique capabilities of an elite set of men, individuals who, through their initiative and vision, continue to enhance our lives.

This narrative, of course, is a fallacy. It is an ideological position used to justify and legitimate the way Internet companies insinuate themselves into our lives. It justifies the massive amounts of capital that these companies hoard, the political favours they receive, and the folk hero status of individuals such as Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey, Jeff Bezos, Larry Page, and Sergey Brin. There are, of course, critiques of the way these companies and individuals operate within society, and these critiques continue to grow as time goes by. It is, however, a possibility that the folk heroes critiqued today end up like their predecessors. Bill Gates, for example, ruthless in his youth, is now typically seen as a benevolent philanthropist<sup>67</sup>, and the brutality and failures of Steve Jobs have largely been overshadowed by his charisma and cult-like following, a belief that everything he touched turned to gold. Zuckerberg seems likely to follow in Gates' footsteps as he continues to build the charity he heads with his wife, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. Bezos will perhaps follow Jobs, the image of a workplace tyrant replaced by a man with vision, as he steps back from Amazon to focus on saving the planet and exploring space<sup>68</sup>. All their anti-social behaviours and creations will be eventually forgotten, leaving them as exemplars of the success that accompanies apparent technological genius.

The successes of digital technologists such as Zuckerberg, Bezos, Gates, and Jobs play an essential role in the myth of the Internet. In the myth, success fills two functions: the first, displacing failure, and the second, allowing the benefits of the myth to be both exclusive to those with the necessary capital and inclusive of anyone who wishes to participate. By claiming success as a result of the genius of digital technologists, those who benefit from the myth of the Internet

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<sup>67</sup> It has recently emerged that Bill Gates' wife, Melinda, has filed for divorce in light of Gates' alleged association with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein (Pengelly & Neate 2021). The pair will remain co-chairs and trustees of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

<sup>68</sup> Bezos officially handed off Amazon to Andy Jassy on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (Palmer 2021).

are able to construct a foil for their narrative. Success accompanies a particular type of genius, and those that do not have access to that genius are positioned as the reason for failure. Here is the tyranny of the technologist, congratulating themselves when they win and blaming the masses when they do not; it is not a failure of the technology or the product, but of the people. Genius, in the myth of the Internet, is considered to be underappreciated and misunderstood, especially by critics, and the masses are encouraged to graciously accept the gifts that the genius technologists provide. In this way, genius is presented as binary; either one has it or does not. At the same time, the myth of the Internet works to restore a sense of social mobility; genius needs to be applied and so its success is argued to be the result of hard work, and success is therefore deserved. Success, even if one is not a genius but chooses to work for one, becomes accessible, aspirational. Anyone, it is reasoned, can join the Internet elite if they just work hard enough. A bastardised, populist form of the Protestant ethic (Weber 1905/2011) is at work in the myth of the Internet: either we are born geniuses, predetermined for success, or we are able to work hard and are promised success in return.

To examine the myth of the Internet as it is commonly constructed within contemporary society, I turn to the work of Thomas Schatz (1981, 2012). In his study of film genres, Schatz (1981) argues that genres evolve and develop, that each film within a genre is never quite the same as the one that preceded it. Schatz connects film genres to myth-making, particularly Hollywood film genres and American myth-making, claiming that, like myths, “genre films [...] serve to defuse threats to the social order and thereby to provide some logical coherence to that order” (1981, p. 263), and that genre films are dependent on fulfilling this social function for their success. As overarching narratives themselves, even as they mature and change with time, genres for Schatz are “a manifestation of fundamental cultural preoccupations” (2012, p. 117); they can tell us something about the society and cultural context within which they exist. Schatz’s theory of genre evolution, therefore, provides an analytical tool through which the myth of the Internet can be examined, as it considers both the variations that occur between individual narratives and the

broader myth that occurs across them. By considering the myth of the Internet as a genre that evolves, the singular narrative of the Internet we are encouraged to believe in is problematized.

## Genre Evolution

The evolutions that occur within a genre are central to Schatz's (1981, 2012) theorising. He argues that genres respond to audience taste and sensibilities; when an audience grows bored with genres tropes, the genre must develop the tropes further to retain satisfactory viewership numbers. Audiences are understood to communicate their feelings to studios and directors through the box office, with a film's commercial success seen as an indicator of audience approval. Schatz's model of genre evolution defines four key stages that a genre will pass through as it matures: the experimental stage, the classical stage, the refinement stage, and the self-reflexive stage. In the experimental stage, a genre emerges; a cluster of films begin to exhibit common ideas and symbols. As they are based mainly on 'real-world' events, these films reflect the lived reality of the audience. The common tropes are then purposefully included and exaggerated in the classical stage, establishing them as a firm canon. In this stage, Schatz argues that both the narrative of a film and the film techniques used operate in tandem, both communicating the same message to the audience. Once an audience begins to demand a more nuanced interpretation of the common features, the genre shifts into the refinement stage. Here Schatz argues that films begin to question genre features; the tropes have become hyperreal, and often film techniques are at odds with the narrative, one presenting a social message and the other questioning it. Through this questioning, the genre enters the self-reflexive stage, where the film's narrative acts as a surrogate for the genre itself. The tropes themselves become the narrative, rather than just symbols assisting in telling it.

Complicating the four-stage model is Schatz's lack of clarity around the actual purpose of the fourth stage. He calls it variously a self-reflexive (1981, pp. 38, 41, 264), a baroque (1981, pp.

40, 265), and a parody (1981, pp. 38, 40, 264) stage throughout his *Hollywood Genres* (1981) text. On the one hand, films Schatz seemingly locates in this fourth stage are darker, psychological narratives within the genre, and on the other hand, the films are an explicit visual commentary on the genre itself, where genre symbols are exaggerated as if to wink at the audience, letting them know that the film makers too are in on the joke. This ambiguity of purpose becomes useful in chapter three, where I argue that the fourth stage of the myth of the Internet can be considered a carnival, which in itself is ambivalent and shifting.

As a working model for this thesis, the basis for Schatz's four stages can be found in this passage of text:

We might begin with this observation: at the earliest stage of its life span, a genre tends to exploit the cinematic medium as a medium. If a genre is a society collectively speaking to itself, then any stylistic flourishes or formal self-consciousness will only impede the transmission of the message. At this stage, genre films transmit a certain idealized cultural self-image with as little 'formal interference' as possible. Once a genre has passed through its **experimental** stage where its conventions have been established, it enters its **classical** stage. We might consider this stage as one of *formal transparency*. Both the narrative formula and the film medium work together to transmit and reinforce that genre's social message – its ideology or problem-solving strategy – as directly as possible to the audience.

[...] The genre film reaffirms what the audience believes both on individual and on communal levels. Audience demand for variation does not indicate a change in belief, but rather that the belief should be re-examined, grow more complicated formally and thematically, and display, moreover, stylistic embellishment.

Thus, the end of a genre's classic stage can be viewed as that point at which the genre's straightforward message has 'saturated' the audience. With its growing awareness of the formal and thematic structures, the genre evolves into what [Henri] Focillon termed the age of **refinement**. As a genre's classic conventions are refined and eventually **parodied** and subverted, its transparency gradually

gives way to opacity: we no longer look through the form (or perhaps ‘into the mirror’) to glimpse an idealized self-image, *rather we look at the form itself to examine and appreciate its structure and its cultural appeal*. (Schatz 1981, p. 38, italics in original, other emphasis added)

The **experimental** stage considers the Internet’s origins within the ARPAnet. The social message is clear: the Internet begins as an object of scientific enlightenment, built by underappreciated benevolent geniuses who believe they can make the world a better place with technology. The technology is framed as a means to an end, a neutral tool that can be emancipatory with the right people wielding it. This stage of the myth has been largely obscured as the myth has evolved; it remains primarily of interest to digital technologists “collectively speaking to [themselves]” (Schatz 1981, p. 38).

Advances in personal computing precede the shift to a **classical** stage; these advances facilitate a move away from ARPA and working scientists to hobbyists, able to explore the potentials of the network for their personal ends. The trope of genius technologists is reinforced as the network becomes more technically complex, with levels of access determined by levels of ability. The network begins to be seen less as a straightforward tool and more as a landscape in its own right; American frontier mythology takes on a growing role as the network moves into the hands of civilians. The notion that the Internet can bring about a better world remains, shifting from a better world through scientific progress to a better world through social progress. The commercialisation of the network begins to occur as the belief that this technology can benefit the United States economically begins to develop across business, finance, and political industry. These changes represent the “demand for variation” that Schatz (1981, p. 38) notes, as the belief in the good of the Internet remains the same despite shifts in what that notion of good means.

The **refinement** stage develops in the wake of the Dot Com Crash at the turn of the millennium. The social context necessitates a shift in how the Internet is understood and a refinement of its potential. The Dot Com Crash emphasised that there had been a lack of

understanding regarding the economic possibilities of the network, while the Internet companies that emerged post-Crash – and the ones that survived it – demonstrate a more mature and nuanced comprehension of the limitations and boundaries they need to navigate. The trope of the technological genius is amplified throughout this stage, articulated centrally by the massive economic success that Internet companies began to experience; those who failed in the Dot Com Crash are seen as lacking the foresight and talent needed to make the Internet work for them, placing their failures as a result of their lack of applied genius rather than as reflective of the sector as a whole. The belief in the inherent good of Internet technology is again a dominant driver of the myth, understood as demonstrated by the incredible amounts of money that pour into Internet companies; neoliberal capitalism rewards the heroes of the myth, and that is presented as a good for us all.

When considering the myth of the Internet through Schatz's model, it is clear that, in some ways, the myth itself has not evolved past the refinement stage. There is still a seriousness attached to the myth, particularly from the leaders in the Internet industry itself. Amongst the public, however, the fourth **parody** stage exists as an expression of dissent and nihilism; in the parody of the Internet, key features are exaggerated to make clear their absurdity, often as a challenge to the hegemonic power structure but also as recognition of that power structure being too difficult to challenge seriously. The myth of the Internet is never just one thing, and as Tag Gallagher (2012) argues, the stages are not necessarily isolated from one another. Key to the fourth stage is that it does not necessarily reject the tropes and social messages that have been duly presented and refined throughout the prior three stages. This fourth stage simultaneously subverts and re-inscribes the tropes and social messages as the norm through its parody.

Schatz's four-stage model provides a framework within which the myth of the Internet can be examined. It suggests a way to compartmentalise a large and shifting narrative to make it accessible for analysis in a way that both the shifts and the constancies can be acknowledged. In the sections that follow, the first three stages – experimental, classical, and refinement – of the

myth of the Internet are examined. The fourth stage – parody – is the subject of the next chapter; it is a reflection of the consequence of the prior stages rather than necessarily being a part of the historical narrative the myth constructs. As Schatz occasionally describes it, this fourth stage is self-reflexive, so it is both intrinsically linked to the narrative that precedes it and outside of it, looking back in.

## Building the Future: the Engineering Internet

In 2012, Barack Obama was on the presidential campaign trail in Roanoke, Virginia, when he declared that “the Internet didn’t get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet” (Office of the Press Secretary 2012a). He was emphasising the role the United States government played in bringing the internet into existence and pushing past the idea that it was created solely by wealthy entrepreneurs like the ones he argued were dodging their tax responsibilities<sup>69</sup>. His point was that the businesses that had made some individuals extremely wealthy were not created in a vacuum and that they relied on the United States government to lay the groundwork upon which they could build. Within the Internet industry, this is typically not questioned. The accepted history of the Internet acknowledges the contribution of ARPA researchers in the establishment of network protocols that allowed for computers to connect on a global scale. This is clear in the articles published not long after Obama’s speech, in response to Gordon Crovitz, a journalist who had written a scathing denial of the government’s involvement in the internet for *The Wall Street Journal*. Crovitz (2012) rejected Obama’s declaration, instead arguing that the government had actually hindered the work of private enterprise in building the internet, slowing them down with

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<sup>69</sup> The extent to which Internet billionaires avoid paying taxes was exposed by ProPublica in 2021, when they published findings from over 15 years of tax information on the 25 wealthiest people in the United States that they had been given. Among their findings was Jeff Bezos’ ‘true tax rate’ of 0.98% for the years 2014-2018 and the fact that in 2011, Bezos had “claimed and received a \$4,000 tax credit for his children” (Eisinger, Ernsthausen & Kiel 2021).



bureaucratic processes. The response to Crovitz's piece was swift and rejected his interpretation of Internet history. For the digital magazine *Slate*, Farhad Manjoo argued that "Crovitz's entire yarn is almost hysterically false. [...] If you spend time looking at the history of the Internet, you'll find the government there at every step" (2012). Timothy B. Lee, writing for *Ars Technica*, argued that "not only is Crovitz confused about the origins of the Internet, he also seems not to understand the conventions of the World Wide Web" (2012). In an observation piece published by *Scientific American*, Michael Moyer argued that "Crovitz's story is based on a profound misunderstanding of not only history, but technology" (2012). It is very much accepted that ARPA and the United States government were essential for developing the internet.

This is not to say that the role of the government within the myth of the Internet has been static as the myth has evolved. Influenced by the libertarian arguments that were to come, today the role of the government in the myth has been minimised, largely relegated to funding the researchers and scientists who actually made the ARPAnet. It rarely acknowledges the way working within ARPA acted as a catalyst for building the first digital network. The unique combination of access to Department of Defense funding, a need to make research more efficient, and the freedom and control made available to ARPA's Information Processing Techniques Office (IPTO) team at the time can all be considered necessary for the development of the Internet. The purpose of the myth of the Internet at this stage, however, is to allow for the central tropes and symbols of the myth to be "isolated and established" (Schatz 1981, p. 37). As one of the primary messages of the myth of the Internet is the celebration of unique technological genius, the complexities of the role of both the United States government and ARPA in the creation of the internet are necessarily set aside, included but unacknowledged<sup>70</sup>, so that the individual technologists who formulated and constructed the network are given priority.

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<sup>70</sup> Obama's speech, for instance, claims that the internet was created for the benefit of commercial enterprise, rather than for research or defence.

A second significant trope that is established in this stage of the myth of the Internet is the Internet's American-ness. The sociocultural context within which the events of this stage take place works to locate the Internet as an American invention. In much the same way that the breadth of the contribution of the United States' government is side-lined, the contribution of other nations to the construction of the Internet is also largely ignored. Whilst there is some recognition given to Donald Davies, a computer scientist in the United Kingdom, for his early theorising<sup>71</sup>, his inability to build a functioning network akin to the ARPAnet ends his role in the myth<sup>72</sup>. Accountability for the failure here is not located with Davies, however, but with the United Kingdom: the ARPA technologists were granted access to the bounty of American excellence, access that the United Kingdom was unable to replicate for Davies. The ARPA technologists are not merely geniuses; they are *American* geniuses. This distinction is foundational for subsequent stages of the myth, as it ties together technological success with American success, suggesting that they are one and the same.

There is seemingly a contradiction here between the emphasis on the individual contribution rather than the contribution of the United States government, and the emphasis given to America as a necessary backdrop for those individuals to succeed. However, when read alongside the myth of America, the divergence of America from the United States government is clear; America exists as an idea, an identity, rather than necessarily as an institution. America transcends the United States, as a nation rather than a geopolitical state. To downplay the role of government funding whilst also amplifying the importance of American nationality does not

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<sup>71</sup> Davies was a recipient of a Charles Stark Draper award in 2001, an industry-awarded prize that he received in recognition of his role as one of the 'Fathers of the Internet' (Dodge 2001).

<sup>72</sup> There is also an important role in the myth of the Internet played by British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee, credited with inventing the World Wide Web (WWW). Berners-Lee's role in the myth is established in the next stage, however for now it should be noted that whilst Berners-Lee is British, the browser he developed to access the WWW – called WorldWideWeb but later renamed Nexus – was quickly overshadowed by various browsers coming out of United States universities (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). Often considered the first successful browser, the Mosaic web browser developed by Americans Marc Andreessen and Eric Bina was significant in making the WWW accessible (Freiberger & Swaine 2000).

represent a conflict but instead builds on beliefs central to the myth of America, such as individualism and exceptionalism.

## *The Beginnings of a Global Network*

It is generally accepted that the Internet as we understand it today is built using technology invented for the ARPAnet. A distinction is made between the two, the Internet and the ARPAnet, where the ARPAnet is presented as a primitive precursor, more akin to the internet than the Internet<sup>73</sup>. This conception is useful within the myth of the Internet, as it allows for the ARPAnet to exist as simply a tool for advancing scientific progress; the ARPAnet is not necessarily a world in itself, but access to potential resources for researchers to make use of. This provides the Internet with benevolent origins, and places it within an Enlightenment trajectory of progress where progress is understood as intrinsically beneficial for humankind.

The historical narrative central to the myth of the Internet begins in the 1960s. It was a so-called “golden era” for those working in research and development agencies (Huff & Sharp 1975, pp. I-4); they were riding what would be the tail-end of the United States’ post-war economic boom, benefiting from the billions of dollars being spent on improving the international superiority of the United States. ARPA, as an advanced research agency within the Department of Defense, were recipients of their share of this rush of funding (Naughton 2016); in 1963, ARPA’s 100 professional employees were handling 683 contracts, with a budget of \$1,383,465,371 US dollars<sup>74</sup> (Huff & Sharp 1975). Despite this budget, progress for researchers was slow going. The computers at the time were unwieldy mainframe and timeshare machines, centralised processing

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<sup>73</sup> A reminder here of the distinction between the internet and the Internet, as mentioned at the beginning of the thesis: the internet refers to the connections between computers, where data is transferred from one to another, with the network only coming into being as the transfer of data occurs; the Internet is conceived of spatially, as a pre-existing space that can be accessed by a user, something of a separate world that can be entered.

<sup>74</sup> This is in today’s dollars to emphasise the scale of their budget (10/05/2021).

units that were accessed through a terminal computer. Researchers would have to share the use of these computers, and because of the minimal processing power, functions were slow and could only occur one at a time. Aware of the restrictions the computers placed on ARPA's ability to complete its contracts, in 1963 the head of ARPA's new IPTO, J. C. R Licklider, proposed that by linking all of ARPA's computers together in a network, there would be a greater range of functions for individual computers and their users:

If such a network as I envisage nebulously could be brought into operation, we would have at least four large computers, perhaps six or eight small computers, and a great assortment of disc files and magnetic tape units—not to mention the remote consoles and teletype stations—all churning away. (Licklider 1963)

To link the computers in a network as Licklider was proposing would allow a researcher's computer to draw on any machine in the network that was sitting idle, maximising the amount of data that could be processed at any one time. The network would also allow researchers to use programs built for computers that operate using a different programming language without requiring them to first reconstruct the program in the programming language of their own machine. Licklider's proposal was distributed as a memorandum for his colleagues, and in it, he dubbed the network an "Intergalactic Computer Network" (1963). Within the myth of the Internet, these benign origins are important; even though the United States Department of Defense funded ARPA, the focus is placed on collaboration between researchers rather than any direct military function the network may have had (Townes 2012).

Licklider exists in the myth of the Internet as a type of prophet, heralding what was to come without playing a hands-on role himself. He was with the IPTO for two years before handing the reins to a 26-year-old Caltech and MIT graduate, Ivan Sutherland. Sutherland oversaw significant advances in timesharing technology; Licklider claims that he does not "know when time-sharing would have been if it wasn't for ARPA" (quoted in Huff & Sharp 1975, p. VI-51). Within a couple of years, Sutherland had shifted back into the university and was replaced by Bob

Taylor in 1966 (Townes 2012). Taylor is an important character in the myth of the Internet, as it was he who took Licklider's idea of a computer network and brought it into being. Taylor was motivated by the growing incompatibility of ARPA computers; developments in the computer industry meant that ARPA researchers were often using machines from different manufacturers and updated versions of older machines would run different software, making the information researchers were amassing untranslatable between the different computers (Ryan 2011). Taylor reasoned that Licklider's universal network would cut out time wasted by researchers duplicating research and that this would thus accelerate the production rate of new research. Taylor's idea was persuasive, and funding was easy to come by; Taylor walked out of a meeting with his ARPA boss in 1966 after only twenty minutes with \$1 million USD to develop this network, to be known as the ARPAnet (Hafner & Lyon 1996; Lukasik 2010).

What the myth of the Internet largely bypasses in this origin story is the broader purpose of research and development funding made available during this time. Whilst the myth focuses on the use of internetworked computers for improving the efficiency of research work, there remains an apocalyptic undercurrent unspoken within the narrative. Technological innovation was rife throughout World War II; faster planes and better weapons were developed, and often technological superiority was considered the difference between life and death (Ryan 2011). After the fall of Nazi Germany, the threat of the new technologies developed for the war still loomed. The devastation wrecked upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 cemented a fear of nuclear war in the popular imagination, and the Soviet's apparent success with the R-7 Semyorka intercontinental ballistic missile and the Sputnik satellite in 1957 was cause for concern in the United States (Naughton 2016; Ryan 2011). It was believed that if the Soviets were so technologically advanced as to get Sputnik into orbit, they must be capable of potentially devastating attacks should the situation ever arise. The race to match them technologically accelerated, and it was at this moment that ARPA itself was created (Lukasik 2010; Ryan 2011).

As already mentioned, there was significant funding available for research and development. Part of the funding made available went towards improving communication technology. The threat of nuclear war brought with it a realisation that if an attack were to occur, the resulting damage had the potential to compromise severely not just the capacity for retaliation but communications more broadly (Kirstein 1999). If an attack damaged lines of communication, there could be no quickly coordinated response, leaving the country vulnerable. In response to this, the United States contracted research and development organisation RAND to find a solution. Researchers at RAND decided that traditional lines of communication where a message would pass from the sender, through a central exchange, and on to the receiver were particularly vulnerable to attack; if the line of connection to the exchange, or the exchange itself, were for some reason disrupted, the message would be undeliverable. In light of this, one of RAND's researchers, Paul Baran, developed a distributed communication technique (Townes 2012). The primary communication system at the time was reliant on a dominant centre, but Baran's distributed system removed that centre, a fishnet style web reliant "on a dense network of connections to shuffle information across the country" (Johnson 2012, p. 12). Because Baran was using a digital system, this technique would see the message broken into multiple parts – he termed these 'message blocks' – each containing a portion of the message. The individual blocks would then be sent separately along various communication lines to the receiver, where the blocks would then be reconstructed to form the whole message (RAND 2019). If a line was disrupted or already in use, the block would switch to another line to continue its journey. There would be no central exchange and, because the blocks were smaller, they would travel quicker, clearing communication lines faster for the next message. Baran's was a system that could handle considerable disruption to the network.

Baran, however, is largely neglected in the myth of the Internet. Barry Leiner et al. (2009) note and dismiss a rumour that the architecture for the Internet was built upon Baran's work; they reject the idea that the internet architecture arose from a desire to build a network resistant to

nuclear attack. Lawrence Roberts, who would be the one to oversee the eventual construction of the ARPAnet, similarly denies Baran's contribution, claiming that "the RAND work had no significant impact on [...] Internet history" (Roberts 2007). The historical narrative within the myth of the Internet is constructed in such a way as to leave Baran's work irrelevant, ensuring that nuclear catastrophe does not overshadow the push for scientific progress.

Having secured funding, Taylor went to work transforming Licklider's theoretical network into a functioning reality. This part of the narrative works to construct the image of the technological genius, the man<sup>75</sup> ahead of his time. Many of those involved in this next phase were in their early thirties, establishing their careers; their genius is not the result of decades of experience but youth and innovation. This trope is consistent throughout the myth of the Internet, and the idea of the wunderkind is often invoked to justify and excuse the behaviour of young tech CEOs. Digital technology is presented as a young person's game, with those who age in the industry stepping aside to make room for those who are to come next. There is something of an entitlement to this; success is the result of talent rather than age, and therefore it is believed that it should be recognised regardless of how young the individual is. The reverse is rarely the case, as those older are considered past their prime and good for mentoring and investing but not for innovation and creative new ideas.

The impatience of youth and genius becomes apparent within the historical narrative when ARPA researchers beyond the IPTO refused to start using the fledgling network Taylor had developed. There existed a fear amongst researchers that connecting to a network would cause a strain on their computer's resources, making already time-consuming machines slower and more unreliable to use (Lukasik 2010). The network was still running the same way telephones operated:

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<sup>75</sup> This is deliberately gendered language, used to highlight the gendered focus of the myth of the Internet.

data would be sent, whole, along the line to the receiving computer. It was not until Taylor hired Lawrence Roberts that this began to change. Prior to his work at ARPA, Roberts' had constructed, with his colleague Thomas Merrill, an analogue network between two computers, one in Massachusetts and the other in California (Navarria 2016b). The network was slow and inefficient, but Roberts strove to improve it. Working for ARPA allowed him to do so, and it was there that he realised that the doctoral thesis of MIT graduate Leonard Kleinrock provided the answer. Kleinrock had designed a system similar to Baran's, relying on digital packet-switching to send data broken into 'packets' to ensure speed and flexibility. Despite this more efficient system, ARPA researchers remained hesitant. For the network to be effective, it needed many points of connection; the greater the choice of nodes for a packet to pass through, the faster and stronger the connection would be. For the network to be effective, it required people to participate. However, there was still a reluctance to use a network that was a drain on their individual computers, even if the ARPAnet team promised them that this would only be temporary. Seeking mass participation, Roberts declared in 1967 that ARPA would not purchase any new computers until researchers had "used up all the resources of the network" (Roberts 1989, p. 16). This threat suggests an air of elitism, where the young technological genius knows best and everyone else should trust in them and follow their lead. Roberts forces the network on unwilling researchers, suggesting a belief that it is a natural step in scientific progress and thus a moral necessity for improving the lot of humankind. Whilst Roberts himself may not have had these broader ideas in mind when he made his declaration, the trope of the technologist pushing back against a society reluctant to move into the future flows throughout the myth of the Internet as a way to justify brash and unconventional technological developments and to provide the technologist the character of a visionary seer, able to see something the rest of us cannot.

To solve researcher hesitancy, the IPTO team found a technological fix: team member Wesley Clarke suggested adding in an intermediary machine in between computers in the network. These Interface Message Processors (IMPs) would remove the stress of the network from



researchers' computers by handling all the tasks associated with the transmission of data between machines (Ryan 2011). The transmission of data required a significant amount of computing power, and by transferring this requirement onto separate IMPs, the drain of the network would not compromise the already low processing power of researchers' computers. In 1969, ARPA granted technology company Bolt, Beranek and Newman (BBN) the contract to build the IMP machines (Lukasik 2010; Naughton 2016). BBN, before this, had been instrumental in the creation of a time-sharing system for computers, a system wherein multiple users could have access to a mainframe computer through separate terminals; this would share the power of the mainframe computer between the users, allowing them to take advantage of the periods when the mainframe computer was idle. What BBN represents within the myth of the Internet is an ethos of collaboration and innovation; the leading engineer of the team assigned to build the IMPs, Frank Heart, believed in the value of small teams made up of the very best people so as to allow them to be able to keep track of what each other was working on. The small BBN team was also idiosyncratic, working long hours at desks that were little more than wooden doors with legs nailed onto them (Ryan 2011). There is a focus here on the eclectic eccentricity of technological genius, of minds that operate in unique ways the rest of us cannot comprehend. This genius is presented within the myth as underestimated; there was a belief in the broader technological industry at the time that the IMP machines would not be completed, a belief voiced by industry giant IBM in particular (Navarria 2016b). IBM argued that the technology was too new and untested, thus likely to fail (Ryan 2011). As IBM was the leading manufacturer of computers at the time, its dismissal of the IMPs exposed IBM as conservative and cautious, if not slightly afraid of this challenge to their traditional authority. IBM operated using a bureaucratic model; in a documentary on the origins of the personal computer, Robert Cringely claimed that IBM hired "conservative hard workers straight from school" who would work "nine to five and on Saturdays washed the car" (Sen 1996). BBN's ultimate success in getting the IMPs to work exists within the myth of the Internet as a denouncement of this traditional bureaucratic structure. By the end of October 1969,

the BBN team had connected two computers to IMPs<sup>76</sup> and the computers had managed to connect successfully with one another via the ARPAnet (Lukasik 2010).

The rejection of traditional authority and hierarchies is a central trope throughout the myth of the Internet. It provides the myth with a sense of rebellion, well-suited for its obsession with the young genius figure. The rebellion is presented as socially positive, a better way of organising social life, as it emphasises the benefits of collaboration and consensus. This is how the construction of network protocols are framed; ARPA provided funding to graduate students at universities across the United States to develop protocols that would regulate the way the network formed and negotiated connections, dictating which channels the small packets of data would travel along so as to avoid delays and work to reroute them if necessary. In constructing these network protocols, the students developed a way of working that rejected traditional hierarchy and focused on a consensus-based approach (Ryan 2011). As they were all students, there was a lack of clarity about which of them – if any – had the most authority, and so their work developed the same shape as the network they were helping to create, decentralised and open (Navarria 2016a). Their consensus-based approach is also presented as a meritocratic approach, allowing for what the collective perceived to be the best ideas to rise to the top regardless of where they were coming from. The Network Control Protocols (NCP) developed by the students allowed for regulated access between individual computers and the ARPAnet, and their collaborative efforts reinforced the belief that the way these early digital technologists were working was a social good.

By including university students in the construction of network protocols, ARPA encouraged the spread of the ARPAnet beyond its own facilities. Universities were considered prime locations for connection to the ARPAnet, placing the focus squarely on its potential to

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<sup>76</sup> One of these computers was at the University of California in Los Angeles and the other was at Stanford University.

revolutionise scientific research. In the early 1970s, Norman Abramson, a professor at the University of Hawaii's electrical engineering and computer science department, became interested in connecting his department to the ARPAnet to use its resources (Naughton 2016). His dilemma was that connecting required using telephone cables; Hawaii's distance from the mainland, combined with the University's seven campuses being spread across four islands, made the cost of leasing the necessary telephone lines too expensive and impractical. In response, Abramson developed a network that worked using radio waves, making it more affordable to send data between the different campuses (Hafner & Lyon 1996). Known as the Packet Radio Network, or PRnet, within the myth of the Internet this network reflects the creativity and ingenuity of digital technologists. The PRnet also allows for further re-entrenchment of the belief in the superiority of technological genius; the ARPAnet came under threat in the late 1960s as its lack of military function made it vulnerable to the budget cuts that were occurring across the Department of Defense. However, the ARPAnet team were able to come up with a plan to circumvent these cuts. The economic boom that the United States had experienced after World War II was coming to an end; international manufacturing had picked back up, and the United States' foreign-bound exports had significantly dropped from 29.3 per cent of total world exports in 1953 to 13.4 per cent in 1971 (Berger 2017). The United States economy began to stagnate, and in 1969, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield planned to cut \$400 million from the defence budget (Ryan 2011). Losing funding would mean the end for the ARPAnet; however, the PRnet had direct military application, as it worked on radio waves rather than cables which allowed military personnel to use it to improve communication in the field (Naughton 2016). ARPA picked up Abramson's work and used it to expand the ARPAnet, allowing them continued access to Department of Defense funding. It is not the military function of the PRnet that the myth of the Internet highlights, but the ability of ARPA researchers to outsmart the bureaucratic system to ensure that their work could continue, a type of gaming of the system that would eventually become central to the tax avoidance operations of companies such as Apple and Amazon (Eisinger et al. 2021).

This presumed superiority of technologists occurs again with the SATnet, a network that relies on satellites to transfer data. The SATnet was built on an existing line of communication developed between the United States and Norway as a result of Cold War nuclear paranoia (Kirstein 1999; Lukasik 2010). The United States had considered it imperative to develop better ways to detect nuclear weapons because of the Soviet Union's apparent successes with weapons like the R-7 Semyorka missile. It was determined in 1957 that seismology provided an efficient detection method, though due to safety issues and a ban on open-air testing, the United States military had to look elsewhere for a place to conduct their tests. By 1970, they brokered an agreement with Norway, where researchers would conduct tests in an underground bunker and send the results back to the United States using the Nordic satellite station based in Sweden (Lukasik 2010). This satellite connection became an opportunity for the ARPAnet team. Disregarding the satellite's military functions, they devised a method to use the satellite to connect the nuclear testing facility in Norway with the ARPAnet in 1973 (Ryan 2011). The team spread the network further, using landline cables to connect the ARPAnet from the nuclear testing facility to University College London (Kirstein 1999). Researchers in the United Kingdom were eager to have access to the ARPAnet, and uptake was so high that a satellite connection using civilian satellite stations was established, and by 1979, the landline cable between London and Sweden was decommissioned (Ryan 2011); reliance on the military facility had been overcome, and the technological geniuses had prevailed.

The final significant step in the development of the ARPAnet, and the basic conventions of the myth of the Internet, occurred in 1973. By this point in time, there were three different methods to connect to the ARPAnet: cables, radio waves, and satellite link. These different methods led to issues with the NCP originally developed to connect computers to IMPs, and then on to the ARPAnet; the NCP simply was unable to keep up (Kirstein 1999; Naughton 2016). It was incapable of providing consistent, stable, and efficient connection across the different methods. There had also been massive advances in computer technology; by 1973, Xerox had

released the first prototypes for personal computers – rather than mainframe or minicomputers – and microprocessors had gone through extensive development, wildly extending the possibilities of what users could programme a computer to do and allowing for further growth in the industry, adding more stress to the NCP system (Ryan 2011). To solve this issue, Bob Khan and Vinton Cerf developed a new protocol to provide the rules of connection: the Transmission Control Protocol (TCP), which Khan and Cerf quickly amended to include an Internet Protocol (IP) (Kirstein 1999). Cerf had worked for ARPA previously, and Khan had been working for them at the time after having worked for BBN. Whilst these new protocols made the NCP obsolete and, instead of being a collaborative effort in the way the NCP was, was developed by only two men, this change is folded into the myth of the Internet; where the NCP highlights collaboration, the TCP/IP highlights evolution, the continual push towards something better.

The change from NCP to TCP/IP also signals an essential claim to the nature of the network. The new protocols not only made the NCP obsolete, but they also made the IMPs obsolete. That Kahn had worked for the private BBN before shifting to the public ARPA where he worked on the TCP/IP is emblematic of a deeper ontological consideration within the myth of the Internet; the network was to be public and open. By the early 1970s, researchers had grown concerned with the ability of a single company – BBN – to control the network by owning and maintaining the IMPs (Ryan 2011). The TCP/IP decentralised the network, shifting control and responsibility back to individual users. In the myth of the Internet, this is where the removal of the gatekeepers of the Internet begins.

### ***Be Nice to Nerds***

Whilst the ARPAnet was developing, there were significant developments made in computing. Within the myth of the Internet, the historical narrative of personal computing is integral, as it is the personal computer that ultimately brings the Internet to the world. As with the

ARPAnet, this stage of the myth of the Internet is focused on establishing conventions, tropes used to explain and justify later behaviours. Again, the cast of notable characters is small; the dominant narrative leaves out peripheral stories and failed projects in order to construct a streamlined series of events where progress is linear and technological evolution appears natural. Many of the tropes that exist within the narrative of the ARPAnet exist within the narrative of personal computing (Weber 2016), working in tandem to solidly establish the Internet as the product of anti-establishment genius, intended for the betterment of humankind.

Many of the companies associated with the Internet today got their start in Silicon Valley. Located in the southern San Francisco bay area of California, the Valley takes its name from companies, such as Fairchild Semiconductor, who specialised in creating silicon computing chips; these early companies set the tone for the Valley, and their legacies remain documented on the landscape. Outside the original office of Fairchild Semiconductor, for instance, sits a large plaque that explains how the silicon chip “helped revolutionize 'Silicon Valley's' semiconductor electronics industry, and brought profound change to the lives of people everywhere” (Office of Historic Preservation 2021). The importance of the silicon chip for the development of personal computers is rarely overstated, as these small chips replaced the bulky transistor bulbs that computers had required to function (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Silicon chips are also representative of the Valley’s resistance to traditional forms of authority. Fairchild Semiconductor came into being in 1957 when eight employees at Shockley Semiconductor Laboratory had had enough of the authoritarian behaviour of their employer; the employees left Shockley and formed Fairchild, intent on creating a company that prioritised collaboration (Berlin 2007). The successes of Fairchild are well-known; they are still today making silicon chips, and many who have worked for the company have gone on to start their own successful businesses. However, the dreamy image of a company centred in “open communications, laissez-faire management styles, flat organizational structures and autonomous research groups” (Berlin 2007) was oversold. Two of the founders, Robert Noyce and Gordon Moore, eventually left, dissatisfied with the traditional

capitalist direction that Fairchild investors were taking the company, and founded yet another silicon chip business, Intel (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). The intent behind Intel was much the same as the intent behind Fairchild: respect for technical acumen and a collaborative atmosphere. Within the myth of the Internet, these events are presented as anti-elitist and meritocratic; Intel is said to have been started by two men who had “had a row with their boss” (Cringley quoted in Sen 1996), and the company took a laid back approach to work, operating in an office building without any actual offices where everyone – including the boss – worked from a cubicle (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013; Freiberger & Swaine 2000; Moore 1996; Sen 1996). According to Moore, “it’s very important that the ones who have the knowledge make the decisions” (Sen 1996), an approach that echoes in the narrative of the ARPAnet and remains vital to the myth of the Internet.

The attitudes of men like Moore filtered throughout the Valley. This is particularly clear when considering the computer hobbyists of the 1970s. The 1974 release of the Altair 8800 – generally considered the first personal computer – made computing technology accessible in a way that it had not been before (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). Price and size had limited the computer market to large institutions; however, this small portable machine allowed hobbyists to have access to their own computer, extending the amount of time they could spend with the technology (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Even as the myth of the Internet emphasises this apparent democratisation of the computer, it leaves unacknowledged how restrictive access still was. The Altair 8800 was little more than a box with switches and lights that, in the beginning, did not really do anything. It could be programmed to do basic calculations, with a series of switches needing to be flicked and the result being nothing more than a glowing light (Freiberger & Swaine 2000; Sen 1996). Using the Altair required specific types of knowledge that were unavailable to most people, adding to the construction of the technological genius character who is able to comprehend things the rest of us cannot.

Nevertheless, the Altair 8800 was a game-changer for the computer industry. Graduate students would use the larger computers at their universities to access the ARPAnet and share

information and ideas across campuses, pushing one another to find new uses for the Altair. While the computer industry experts had decided that the Altair would never be more than useless flashing lights because it was not big enough to hold a programming language, students pushed back. In a rejection of traditional authority, notions of meritocracy and the value of the creativity of youth shaped the way the Altair was responded to. These ideas are best reflected in the way Bill Gates is enshrined in the myth of the Internet, as Gates becomes something of a flag bearer for the unorthodox hierarchical structure that supposedly frames the creation of the Internet. Gates, along with his friend Paul Allen, dismissed claims the Altair was useless and proved as much with a version of the programming language BASIC that could work as an interpreter for the Altair, making it easier to programme (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Gates' mutated BASIC caused ripples across the industry, not only because it actually worked but also because it was a nineteen-year-old student who had come up with it (Sen 1996). This narrative distorts traditional ideas of hierarchy and experience; the dominance of the technological wunderkind had begun.

These developments created a furore amongst computer hobbyists. They built up a community culture intended to grow the technology as fast as possible, pushing back against those who would suggest there are limitations. Technology writer Steven Levy (2010, pp. 23 - 31) calls this the Hacker culture and argues that its adherents followed six core beliefs:

- Access to computers — and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works — should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative!
- All information should be free.
- Mistrust Authority — Promote Decentralization.
- Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position.
- You can create art and beauty on a computer.
- Computers can change your life for the better.



These beliefs have become core conventions within the myth of the Internet, and their worth is re-inscribed in the narrative by the story of Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, co-founders of Apple. Jobs and Wozniak both frequented the Homebrew Computer Club, a group of computer hobbyists operating out of Silicon Valley (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). The Club would meet weekly to share ideas and show each other the improvements they had made to their machines. There was a culture of collaboration between the members of the Club; they were, largely, children of the sixties, working with a vision of a better world, and understood technology as one of the ways to make that happen. Week by week, Wozniak had been building his own personal computer based on the Altair technology, and Jobs saw potential in what it could be (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). The pair had known each other and been good friends for years by this point, and so the transition to business partners seemingly made sense (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Whilst this could signal a shift within the myth of the Internet to a more capitalistic framework, what remains the focus of the Jobs and Wozniak partnership is their scrappy, yet brilliant, innovation; the story is less about building a business and more about building computers, a passion more than it is a job. Whilst the first Apple product was just a computer chip that customers could use to build their own machine, the second Apple product was to be a complete machine, making the technology accessible to those who wanted to programme without necessarily building their own hardware (Sen 1996). It was an ambitious task at the time, given that many of the more established personal computer companies were floundering due to poor technical skills and even worse marketing skills (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). What made Apple stand out and, within the myth of the Internet, successful was the determination and genius of Jobs and Wozniak; the other companies were just not talented enough nor fixated enough. In another rejection of traditional hierarchies, Jobs' and Wozniak's youth and lack of experience served them well in their endeavour. As Robert Cringely claims, "Steve Job's dream [of the Apple II] was impossible. It needed too many chips, making the product too complicated and expensive to build. But Woz didn't know it was impossible" (quoted

in Sen 1996). Defying expectations, Jobs and Wozniak delivered the Apple II personal computer in 1977 (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013).

The Apple II was an important event in personal computing. People had begun taking their new computers to work with them to avoid using the mainframe machines, which required time-sharing and a hands-off approach (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). The Apple II allowed workers to have a machine to themselves and to process data much faster. Workplace computing started to become more individualised, and the mainframe computer industry giant IBM was hardly impressed. IBM had been the leader in the computing industry for many years (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013); Cringely has described IBM as “like Switzerland: conservative, a little dull, yet prosperous” (quoted in Sen 1996). In order to retain their market position, IBM partnered with fledgling company Microsoft in order to create their own version of the personal computer (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). IBM could build the hardware themselves but required Microsoft’s help with both a programming language and an operating system to make their machine function. The decision to partner with Microsoft is reflective of the power quickly becoming attached to the myth of the technological genius; Microsoft was Bill Gates’ company, and it is not difficult to understand why IBM would turn to him for a new programming language after his success with the Altair. Gates agreed to the partnership; however, he could only provide the programming language, as he was not the owner of the leading operating system of the day, or of any operating system for that matter (Stross 1997). Not wanting to lose the IBM deal, Gates purchased the rights to QDOS, an operating system that was essentially a clone of the leading CP/M operating system. Within the myth of the Internet, the deal with IBM is presented as being less about commerce than it is about competition; in the myth, Apple and Microsoft are pitted against each other in a

revisionist telling of the events based upon the rivalry the companies were to have going forward<sup>77</sup>. At the time, Apple and Microsoft were collaborators, with Microsoft providing the programming language for the Apple II machine; Wozniak himself has written that he had hoped he could “be a star [...] like Bill Gates” (2014). Gates was angling for market dominance rather than competing against Apple, pushing his products onto as many computers as possible. He succeeded with the IBM deal, as upon the release of the IBM personal computer, QDOS became the industry standard, replacing CP/M and making Microsoft a lot of money (Sen 1996).

The IBM machine played a significant role in bringing the personal computer to a commercial market. The IBM name, having been founded in 1911, inspired trust amongst the general population, making the personal computer acceptable in circles beyond computer hobbyists (Gates et al. 1996). Despite the successes of Apple and Microsoft, IBM was still the dominant player in the market. Within the myth of the Internet, this fact works in Gates’ favour. When Microsoft’s partnership with IBM ultimately fell apart, there was a sense that Microsoft was David and IBM was Goliath (Freiberger & Swaine 2000); Gates was still young and was facing down the industry behemoth, and so the fight is presented as being against the establishment. Gates’ management style also served to enhance this perception. Microsoft would hire their employees straight out of school before they had had a chance to work for other companies, and Gates’ would often sit and talk with them as peers (Sen 1996). This created a workforce loyal to Gates and supports a belief that the technological genius exists as part of a meritocratic and collaborative system rather than a tyrannical bureaucracy.

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<sup>77</sup> An infamous example of this rivalry was the late 2000s ad campaign ‘Get a Mac’ put out by Apple. These ads set a youthful ‘Mac’ (played by Justin Long) against a middle-aged ‘PC’ (played by John Hodgman), claiming that Apple computers were superior to ones that ran Microsoft’s Windows operating system. The complete run of ads can be viewed here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eEG5LVXdKo>> [viewed 11/06/2021]. In a surprising twist, Justin Long has recently been hired by Intel to promote their line of computers by explaining how they are better than Macs (Warren 2021).

Within the myth of the Internet, the origin stories of the ARPAnet and the personal computer are, in many ways, oversimplified. This is caused partly by time; memory fades, and only the big moments still stand out. Personal recollections from those involved, such as people like Vinton Cerf and Leonard Kleinrock (Leiner et al. 2009), are filtered through the popular narrative as it has evolved, rather than necessarily reflecting the events at the time. Lawrence Roberts (2007), for instance, has claimed that “the RAND work had no significant impact” on the work he and his colleagues were doing at ARPA in the 1960s, despite a memorandum he had written in 1968 to his employer stating that his team were going to test “a form of communications organization recommended in a distributed digital network study by the RAND corporation” (Roberts 1968). However, the simplicity of these origins serves to construct a solid foundation for the myth of the Internet. It is a narrative that is straightforward, easy to follow, and establishes a handful of important tropes that will be further developed throughout the myth.

These origin stories also serve to mask concerns of privilege. By articulating the developments of digital technology as being the result of technological genius, success becomes something innate that most of us cannot comprehend; we are instead encouraged – or in the case of early ARPA researchers, threatened by Roberts – to get on board and accept the gifts the geniuses deign to grant us. We are expected to be grateful and idolise the technological wunderkind, not to question what other advantages beyond intellect from which those wunderkinder may have benefitted. It is telling that the characters in this stage of the myth are all young white men, often having attended prestigious universities such as Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, and MIT. Class, ethnicity, gender, and age have all played a part in the successes of early digital technologists; however, the myth of the Internet hides that behind the mystique of genius.

This stage of the myth also has a particular intended audience. The general population has little interest in an old technology such as the ARPAnet; those most likely to be presented with this stage of the myth are technologists themselves. The narrative of the ARPAnet and of the personal computer thus act as a type of mirror, allowing those entering the digital technology

industry – whether as hobbyists or as professionals – to imagine themselves as part of this legacy of greatness. The focus on the innate genius of the individual is important to this self-image; it creates a sense that those who work with digital technology are members of an elite club of geniuses, that they have access to secret knowledge and skills that most of the population does not. Membership is supposedly granted irrespective of class, ethnicity, gender, and age, as it is an innate talent that is emphasised. Success via digital technology becomes emblematic of membership to this elite club, encouraging those entering the industry to seek out and propose technological fixes to any problem. If they succeed, it is because they are geniuses, and if they fail, it is because the rest of the world cannot understand their genius.

## Boom Town: the Libertarian Internet

In 1996, John Perry Barlow published an open letter to the governments of the world, rejecting the interference of nation-states in the digital world that was emerging on the Internet. Originally intended as part of the *24 Hours in Cyberspace* project<sup>78</sup>, Barlow's letter was considered too inflammatory for the project's coffee table photography book, and Barlow instead decided to publish it online. Barlow's position as co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation<sup>79</sup> gave his letter weight in the computer and networking world, and it was distributed to and posted on over

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<sup>78</sup> This project was created by photographer Rick Smolan, as a time capsule of images of the effect the Internet had on users in 1996. Barlow's contribution was written whilst he was at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, and was largely a response to the United States' Telecommunications Reform Act that was signed by President Clinton on the same day Barlow penned his letter (Barlow 2006).

<sup>79</sup> The Electronic Frontier Foundation is a digital advocacy organisation created in 1990, offering legal advice and help to those who find themselves on the wrong end of criminal investigations into their online activity. The Foundation was founded with a particular intention to "fund, conduct, and support legal efforts to demonstrate that the Secret Service has exercised prior restraint on publications, limited free speech, conducted improper seizure of equipment and data, used undue force, and generally conducted itself in a fashion which is arbitrary, oppressive, and unconstitutional" (Barlow 1990). Barlow himself was spurred to create the Foundation due to stories like this: "the father in New York who opened the door at 6:00 AM and found a shotgun at his nose. A dozen agents entered. While one of them kept the man's wife in a choke-hold, the rest made ready to shoot and entered the bedroom of their sleeping 14 year-old. Before leaving, they confiscated every piece of electronic equipment in the house, including all the telephones" (Barlow 1990). He was also subjected to interrogation by a Secret Service agent who understood little about the digital source code he was investigating the theft of (Barlow 1990).

20,000 different websites<sup>80</sup> (Barlow 2006). Entitled *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, Barlow's letter was a libertarian call for freedom and self-determination, a staunch defence of the liberty he perceived the Internet provided in the face of governments that he believed to be cowardly and obsolete. In this letter, Barlow envisioned the Internet as a space separated from the industrial world – a cyberspace<sup>81</sup> – and treated it as a new frontier; it was a new world that would leave behind the “privilege and prejudice” (Barlow 1996) of the industrial world and begin anew.

Through his declaration, Barlow unwittingly played a role in the digitisation of America noted in the previous chapter by relocating his own American values to an online world. Barlow in many ways embodied<sup>82</sup> the myth of America: after having been raised in a strict Mormon household, Barlow became deeply involved in the 1960s American counterculture. Whilst a student at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, he would often visit with infamous LSD psychologist Timothy Leary and had a close relationship with the rock band the Grateful Dead who frequently played at Ken Kesey's Acid Tests (Barlow & Greenfield 2018). The significance of the frontier, too, played an important role in Barlow's life, as he took over his family's cattle ranch for a significant period of time upon the death of his father in the 1970s. In the mid-1980s, Barlow made a run for the Wyoming state senate as a Republican candidate, losing by a single vote (Jarnow 2018). That he would go on to become the unofficial “Mayor of the Internet” (Kelly 2018) is both a challenge to and re-inscription of traditional systems of power, rejecting the governments of the industrial world whilst still retaining the values some of those governments represent.

Barlow's libertarian declaration is emblematic of the second stage of the myth of the Internet. Per Schatz, this stage broadens the scope of the myth, moving it along from simply being digital technologists “collectively speaking to [themselves]” (Schatz 1981, p. 38). The historical

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<sup>80</sup> A significant amount, given that in 1996 there were only 257,601 websites in existence (Internet Live Stats 2021).

<sup>81</sup> A term borrowed from William Gibson's 1984 *Neuromancer* novel (Gibson 1984/1986).

<sup>82</sup> Barlow died in 2018.

narrative moves from the ARPAnet to the Internet, edging closer to the Internet as we experience it today. Barlow's imagining of the network as a cyberspace is central to this shift, as it represents the ontological transition to thinking about the immaterial network as a world in itself. This spatial understanding allows the network to be conceived as an alternative to the everyday material world; it is no longer just about how research is done but about how we live our social lives.

During this stage, the network undergoes a process of commercialisation. Control is decentralised through the removal of United States government funding, leaving the maintenance of the network to private providers. The celebration of the move away from government control conceals the growing importance of the myth of America however, as the network begins to be positioned as the way to return to a non-existent American past of freedom and exceptionalism. This idea is accepted and encouraged by the United States government under President Bill Clinton; policies and approaches to the emerging Internet reflect optimism about the economic potentials of the network and the ability to move the nation away from decades of economic decline (Clinton 1997; Clinton & Gore 1997). The positioning of the Internet as a social and national good hides the race for market dominance; this stage of the myth reflects a convergence of libertarianism and neoliberal capitalism, where privatisation is positioned as essential for the democratisation of the network. The characters of this stage are at once benevolent geniuses building utopia and ruthless capitalists determined to prove themselves more intelligent than their competitors.

### *David Becomes Goliath*

The developments companies such as Apple and Microsoft made with the personal computer created a significant new user base for the ARPAnet. A push came from within universities to connect to the ARPAnet to allow those interested in the emerging computer technologies to connect and share advice regardless of where they found themselves (Ryan 2011).

It became clear to ARPA that the levels of demand from outside of ARPA facilities were slowing down the network. So a new network was developed in 1981 for university and industry researchers, moving them off the ARPAnet (Naughton 2016). Dubbed the CSnet – the Computer Science Network – responsibility for funding the network shifted to the National Science Foundation and away from the Department of Defense (Leiner et al. 2009). This shift is significant, as it reinforces the myth of the Internet’s lack of recognition of the role the military played in the initial creation of the ARPAnet. It similarly reinforces the belief that the ARPAnet's purpose was to facilitate scientific progress and, therefore, that it existed as a social good.

Interest quickly spread beyond those looking to discuss the latest advances in computing, and a variety of other networks began to appear, each with a distinct audience and purpose. In 1985, the National Science Foundation decided that rather than fund each network individually, they would establish an umbrella network, the NSFnet, which would not only streamline funding but also help to foster collaboration across disciplines and industries (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). In doing this, the National Science Foundation took control of the network architecture away from the Department of Defense, placing themselves in charge of network protocols and connectivity (Gorman & McLean 2003). Control remained centralised within the United States government, but importantly for the myth of the Internet, it had been removed from direct connection to the military. In the myth of the Internet, the NSFnet marked the end of the ARPAnet, as the majority of users were no longer government researchers but civilians; the ARPAnet itself, however, would not be entirely decommissioned until the end of February 1990 (Ryan 2011).

The NSFnet had broad appeal, but what drove the next stage of the historical narrative of the Internet was the success of the personal computer industry. By 1989, the personal computer industry was worth roughly \$4.1 billion USD<sup>83</sup> (Mosbacher et al. 1991). Bill Gates’ Microsoft had

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<sup>83</sup> Equivalent to \$8.8 billion USD as of May 2021.



gone public, and Steve Jobs had left Apple, which was beginning to falter as Microsoft began to dominate the market. The rise in personal computers became a rise in the number of people wanting to connect to the network; a number of easy-to-use networks began to be established to meet this demand, such as America Online (AOL) in 1989 and Prodigy in 1990 (Ryan 2011). Sitting atop the network architecture maintained by the National Science Foundation, these commercial networks charged users a subscription fee for access, which allowed users to connect with one another and with the information that the networks were beginning to amass. These commercial networks operated as walled gardens, distinct from each other, with users only able to access what was on their particular network (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). The Internet at this time can be thought of through the frontier myth within the myth of America; there was little regulation, and the settlements created by the commercial providers were separated by a barren and dangerous wilderness, accessible only to those with daring-do bravery, a spirit of independence, and adequate technical skills.

There was a drive to harness and civilise this wilderness however, and it is through this that the World Wide Web (WWW) became the dominant network it remains today. Once again, the myth of the Internet emphasises the goal of scientific progress and improving research processes; the story of the WWW begins at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN) with British researcher Tim Berners-Lee (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Like Robert Taylor, Berners-Lee was frustrated by the incompatibility of the computers and systems being used by researchers. CERN researchers, coming from various parts of the world, often brought their own computers with them, leading to a diverse array of machines at the facility that were unable to connect to one another (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013; Ryan 2011). Using the TCP/IP system, Berners-Lee created a map of the different machines, allowing connected users to access data on other machines regardless of the programming language or operating system they were running (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Unlike AOL and its ilk, the TCP/IP framework allowed Berners-Lee's WWW map to be joined without paying a subscription fee to a gatekeeper, and unlike the

ARPAnet, it was easy to navigate (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). The network map of the ARPAnet was only visible to the machines, whereas the network map of the WWW was visible to users; users no longer needed to know the exact location or even existence of data they required, as the WWW would present it to them. The WWW allowed users to push out beyond the frontier towns and explore the wilderness independently.

That Berners-Lee is British and that the WWW was created at CERN in Geneva, Switzerland, is of little concern to the myth of the Internet. Berners-Lee may have invented the WWW, but within the myth, it was American technologists that made it work. The WWW was initially difficult to use. Some computers could only show one line of text at a time and, as such, the user interface would need to accommodate this, which restricted the interface for all computers (Ryan 2011). The initial interface that Berners-Lee developed was also challenging to use on computers running anything other than a UNIX operating system, the system that he had installed on his own NeXT brand computer (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). It is these issues that American technologists stepped in to solve (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). Different user interfaces, also known as web browsers, were created; however, there are only two of any real significance for the myth of the Internet. One of these browsers was ViolaWWW, built by Taiwanese-American Pei-Yuan Wei for the X-Window operating system<sup>84</sup>. ViolaWWW became popular at CERN – unlike Berners-Lee’s interface, it could host tables – which provided it with sway amongst the broader research community. ViolaWWW’s primary contribution within the myth of the Internet however was as inspiration; the browser soon came to the attention of David Thompson at the National Centre for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), which was operating out of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Berners-Lee 1993). Thompson ran a demonstration of the browser for his software design group, showing the potential for a more interactive WWW experience. One

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<sup>84</sup> This operating system was similar to the Unix operating system Berners-Lee had been using, but it used a different interface.

of the students, Marc Andreessen, took note. Funded by the NCSA, Andreessen and his colleague Eric Bina designed and built the Mosaic browser for the X-Window operating system in 1993 (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Within a few months of releasing the browser to the public, the NCSA had created versions that were compatible with other operating systems, giving the browser a broad appeal (Berners-Lee 1993). Andreessen's Mosaic browser had many of the same functions as ViolaWWW, including its ability to display graphics – allowing the WWW to be viewed as more than just text – but it was easier for users to install<sup>85</sup> and Andreessen was quick to fix any technical bugs that users pointed out to him. Mosaic quickly came to dominate the emerging browser industry (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013).

Mosaic's dominance represents an attitude that understands success as earned. Mosaic is presented as being better than its competitors and therefore more worthy of success. It allowed users to create their own web pages and access large swathes of information unavailable through commercial networks such as AOL (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). Its interface was easy for new users to adapt to, opening the digital frontier to more people than ever before (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Mosaic is understood within the myth of the Internet as a tool of democratisation and a significant moment within the Internet's history; technology writer Bob Metcalfe observed in 1995 that with the release of Mosaic, "several million people then suddenly noticed that the Web might be better than sex" (Metcalfe 1995, p. 35).

Mosaic's success also led to a fundamental change in how the Internet is understood. In January 1993, just after the launch of Mosaic, there were fifty web servers<sup>86</sup>. In October 1993, there were over five hundred. In June 1994, there were over fifteen hundred (Wolfe 1994). The amount of web traffic that all of these users were producing was causing a strain on the infrastructure that

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<sup>85</sup> ViolaWWW needed to be installed in tandem with the Viola language, which required technical skill that many of the users who were purchasing the new personal computers did not have (Berners-Lee 1993).

<sup>86</sup> Web servers are where pages for the World Wide Web are stored.

the National Science Foundation was paying to support. It became apparent that the software and infrastructure that civilians – rather than researchers – were using needed external funding (Lawler 1995). The National Science Foundation found that offering the NSFnet backbone free of charge inhibited private investment and constrained the commercial market that was beginning to offer TCP/IP services (Abbate 2010): it was hard for investors to compete with free. In response, the National Science Foundation changed its policies in 1993, pushing all but high data users to commercial networks and providers, forcing infrequent users to pay the fees that providers chose to charge (Lebow 1995). By relinquishing control of the network to commercial operators, the National Science Foundation aligned themselves with the free-market ideology of President Clinton and, as such, were supported by the newly Republican-dominated Congress (Lawler 1995). The network shifted from existing as a research tool to being subject to the whims of the market, outside of government control.

The commercialisation of the network continued to reinforce the trope of the genius technologist. Having completed his studies at the University of Illinois, Marc Andreessen was approached by Jim Clark to discuss the potential of creating a commercial version of Mosaic. Clark had not long before left the computer graphics company that he had founded and had the means to fund the next wave of technological success. Andreessen agreed to the partnership; Clark provided experience with the business end of things and Andreessen the technological skill to create for the emerging digital world (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). The pair quickly set about poaching developers from the Mosaic team. With their combined understanding of how a web browser operates, the company Netscape was formed in 1994, and the Navigator browser was built (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). Acquiring the talent from the original Mosaic team paid off; other companies chose to license Mosaic's source code to create new browsers, however none experienced the successes of Navigator. The technological genius remained in the people rather than the product; the technology was a tool that needed the right people to use it. Further proving this, the Netscape team had the insight of offering their browser free to end-users; whilst other

browsers were being sold to commercial companies who would then pass on the browser to users, Netscape cut out the middle man (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). This secured their market dominance, and by establishing Navigator as the public browser of choice, the team could charge commercial companies to use the product that their employees liked and understood (Sink 2003). What is represented in the myth of the Internet as a celebration of free access to knowledge and the altruism of the Netscape team can thus be understood as a calculated move to undercut other browser companies.

With the commercialisation of the network, the criteria for success within the myth of the Internet shifted. Whilst it had been tied to user numbers and the effectiveness of the technology, commercialisation pushed an economic-based metric: success came to be defined by the economic market value of a company. This can be seen in Netscape's record-breaking Initial Public Offering (IPO) in 1995 (Freiberger & Swaine 2000). At the time, at \$2.9 billion USD<sup>87</sup> it was the largest IPO in history, remarkable for a company that was only two years old. The Netscape IPO caused ripples throughout the technology industry; in the same year, Bill Gates issued a memo to his executive staff stating that Microsoft, which had initially dismissed the Internet as unimportant, was going to enter the browser game (Gates 1995). By this time, Microsoft had become the computer industry heavyweight. Its intention to dominate the browser market posed a significant threat to Netscape; Microsoft had a supportive user base to draw upon and was a brand with significant social capital. Andreessen himself was apparently wary of Gates. Following a 1994 interview, Gary Wolfe (1994) observed that Andreessen imagined the conflict between Netscape and Microsoft as akin to the conflict between Microsoft and IBM in the early days of personal computing. Wolfe claimed that Microsoft forced Andreessen to "operate with a caution that verges on secrecy, a caution that is distinctly at odds with the open environment of the Web" (1994); the commercial

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<sup>87</sup> The company's stocks began trading at \$28 USD a share, peaking at \$75 USD, and closing the day at \$58 USD (Freiberger & Swaine 2000).

success of Navigator had taken priority over collaboration and technological progress for its own sake.

Microsoft's size allowed it to dominate the browser market quickly. The company released Internet Explorer 1.0, its first browser, as part of the Windows 95 operating system, ensuring that every computer running Windows would automatically have access to it, which meant that most people who owned a computer had access to it (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013). After edging out IBM and the downturn at Apple, Microsoft had a monopoly on the operating system market – they had to agree to an antitrust settlement in 1995 (Miller & Shiver Jr. 1997) – allowing them to offer Internet Explorer free of charge to not only end users, as Netscape was doing, but also to commercial users, pushing Internet Explorer as the browser of choice not only for home but for work as well (Haigh 2008). Microsoft had the existing capital to pay large teams of developers to improve the Internet Explorer browser continuously; by the time Internet Explorer 4.0 was released in 1997, Microsoft had over 1,000 people in their browser team (Sink 2003). This devotion of resources changed the browser industry; in May 1996, Netscape controlled 83.2 per cent of the browser market share, and Microsoft only had 7 per cent. By August 1996, Netscape's share had dropped to 62.7 per cent, and Microsoft's had risen to 29.1 per cent (Gromov 2011). Microsoft continued to face antitrust allegations from the United States Securities and Exchange Commission, but by the release of Internet Explorer 5.0 in 1999, they dominated the browser industry (Schiller 1999).

Anticipating the inevitable dominance of Microsoft, Andreessen and Netscape decided to release the source code for the Navigator browser onto the WWW in 1998 (Freiberger & Swaine 2000; Hamerly et al. 1999). This move would allow other technologists to use and edit Navigator, free of charge, flooding the market with new browsers. Within the myth of the Internet, it was a move understood as being anti-establishment; it was a final attack on the corporate titan that was Microsoft. It was also a response to Steve Jobs' 1996 concern that without other options, within “two years, Microsoft [would] own the Web. And that [would] be the end of it” (quoted in Wolf

1996). As with the initial decision to offer Navigator free to public users, however, this moment of altruism masks an economic focus. Releasing the source code was the last thing Andreessen could do to damage Microsoft and reflects the ego of technological genius; in the myth of the Internet, it was not a superior technical skill that allowed Microsoft to dominate Netscape, but their size and resources, and this comes to serve as a representation of the unfairness of the status quo. That Netscape employed similar tactics to gain its initial dominance in the market is understood differently; that was simply a situation of first-mover advantage, with Andreessen claiming that “if we are moving faster than everybody else, then we will simply publish what we have done. We will say, ‘This is how it is done, this is how you write documents to it’” (quoted in Wolfe 1994). Netscape’s success is tied to the skill of its technologists, whereas Microsoft’s is tied to its reserves of capital.

### *Outside of the Petri Dish*

Amidst the race between Netscape and Microsoft to secure market dominance, the Internet itself was undergoing significant changes. As the network architecture was maintained and funded by the National Science Foundation, there were strict limits on the types of content that the network could support (Ceruzzi 2008). In response to the increased traffic on the network, enabled by the user-friendly browsers that were being developed, in 1995 the National Science Foundation changed their Acceptable Usage Policy (Ryan 2011). Whilst civilian users had been shifted onto commercial network providers in 1993, having the high-data users remain on the NSFnet still constrained private investment in the network. The change in the Acceptable Usage Policy removed the restriction on commercial activity; suddenly, there was profit potential in participating in the Internet industry, increasing the competitiveness of network providers as investors began to understand the network as a path to economic success. It also led to the closure of the NSFnet as the Internet’s architectural backbone, as commercial providers rushed to take

that role for themselves (Moschovitis et al. 1999; Ryan 2011). In April 1995, the NSFnet went offline, shifting the responsibilities for maintaining the network onto commercial providers, decentralising the Internet whilst also privatising it.

It is no accident that John Perry Barlow's *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* came in 1996, after the closure of the NSFnet. The end of the NSFnet marks the end of the United States government's involvement in providing the Internet's backbone; for Barlow, the network was liberated from the industrial nation-state, coming to rest in the hands of a global people (which while not stated, we can identify as the 'imaginary Americans'). The purpose of the network changed as it was no longer intended for scientists doing research but for everyday people looking for connection. In this shift, the conceptualisation of the network changed. The WWW, rather than being a tool to locate and access documents hosted on digital servers easily, became the Web, a place where life could be lived. The spatial conception of the Internet is a significant development. It allows the Internet to become a location where society happens, which opens it up as a space for capitalist expansion.

After the closure of the NSFnet, traffic on the Internet was doubling every one hundred days (Moschovitis et al. 1999). The economic returns were immediate; Netscape, for instance, made \$75 million USD in revenue in 1994, its first year. Following the closure of the NSFnet, it made \$375 million USD in 1995 and over \$500 million USD the year after that (Moschovitis et al. 1999; Segaller 1998). The Internet quickly came to represent a golden goose, and stories of whirlwind successes began to fuel the myth of the Internet. Excite, a company that began as a small search engine expanded so rapidly that within three years, its six twenty-three-year-old founders were worth \$10 million USD each and the company moved premises multiple times, going from operating out of a garage to their very own office building as staff numbers increased (Segaller 1998). The idea that fortunes could be made using the Internet was aided by the United States Tax Payer Relief Act of 1997. Under President Clinton, this Act lowered the tax rate of capital gains, encouraging investors to put their money into companies that paid no dividends but



had the potential to increase rapidly in market value (Dai et al. 2013). This tax cut occurred alongside the already low-interest rates that the Federal reserve had introduced in the 1980s (Berger 2017); the two converged to create a situation where debt was cheap, and potential returns were high.

In 1998, 80 per cent of Americans were yet to connect to the Internet. Seeing the already high market valuations of digital companies, investors presumed that as more people got online, the valuations would skyrocket, offering them massive payoffs if they invested early enough. This attitude is summed up best by Jeff Bezos, who would eventually usurp Bill Gates in the late 2010s to become the wealthiest person in the world. “In the spring of 1994,” he tells Robert Cringely in the documentary *Nerds 2.0.1* (Segaller 1998), “I came across the statistic that web usage was growing at 2300 per cent a year. And, outside of a petri dish, I hadn’t seen anything grow that fast.” Bezos’ decision to open an online bookstore came soon after: “I made a list of twenty different products that you might be able to sell online, and picked books as the first best product, primarily because there are so many books” (Kirsch & Goldfarb 2008; Segaller 1998). Books are one of the few objects you do not need physically to hold to know you want to buy, and this insight helped Bezos turn Amazon.com into a company that had a market value of over \$1 million USD before it had made a single profit (Moschovitis et al. 1999; Segaller 1998). The lack of profit did not deter investors; the belief in first-mover advantage prevailed, and investors believed that the eventual returns would make them rich as long as they were patient.

Much of the enthusiasm of this period remains in the myth of the Internet today. During this industry boom, the Internet was characterised as a liberator and the key to America’s future. In 1996, a poll of United States teachers showed that teachers believed that

computer skills and media technology [were] more ‘essential’ than the study of European history, biology, chemistry, and physics; than dealing with social problems such as drugs and family breakdown; than learning practical job skills;

and than reading modern American writers such as Steinbeck and Hemingway or classic ones such as Plato and Shakespeare. (Oppenheimer 1997)

The Internet, alongside the decreasing price of manufacturing personal computers, was seen as democratising education by making it available at every hour of the day and irrespective of age. These utopian beliefs were supported by dubious academic evidence that computers improved children's ability to learn and were reinforced by successful companies such as Apple offering to provide schools with affordable computers (Couch & Towne 2018). In 1997, the Clinton Administration suggested that schools take funding away from vocational training and field trips and instead shift it to computers, a suggestion that was propelled by the lobbying of companies like Apple (Oppenheimer 1997). Computers and the Internet were being positioned by both the industry and the government as the way of the future, and so the industry appeared not only to be a solid investment but also a social good and an educational necessity.

For those within the industry, this period was a golden age. The amount of money pouring into Silicon Valley's Internet companies created a heady atmosphere, and the resulting scene was hedonistic; first-hand reports of the Valley in the mid to late 1990s describe large migration into the Valley, excessive signing bonuses, and outrageous company launch parties (Grimm 2011; Johnson 2011). Spurred on by what economist Alan Greenspan calls "irrational exuberance" (1996), investors raced to outdo one another; a 'get big fast' mantra was pervasive throughout the Valley (Ryan 2011), providing a sense of winner-takes-all where the company that grew the fastest would be able to monopolise their part of the market (Moschovitis et al. 1999). This was underscored with the belief that the success of these companies was reflective of their social worth; the more money there was within the industry, the more opportunities there would be to create technology that would benefit society. Internet companies were no longer restricted by the National Science Foundation or the government, and within the myth of the Internet, the world was better for it.

As quickly as the Internet industry boomed, however, it began to crash. The promised returns remained elusive, and investors began to panic. April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2000, saw the biggest one day decline of the NASDAQ stock exchange in history; that week alone, the NASDAQ suffered a decline of more than 25 per cent (Tymkiw 2000). The irrational exuberance that was fuelling the massive levels of investment began to dissipate as it became clear that many Internet companies were never going to be able to produce a profit. Within the myth of the Internet, this is, of course, not the fault of the technology but of those who were not technologically literate. Pets.com, for instance, was valued at \$82.5 million USD for its IPO in February 2000; nine months later, the site had shut down (Ryan 2011). Like many other digital businesses of the time, the creators of Pets.com did not properly understand the technology they were using. There was little profit in selling pet food online, as shipping cost the customer more, and the product took longer to arrive than if the customer were to go to their local pet store. Along with the cost of product storage and spoilage, Pets.com was operated using a poor business model, despite having built a successful brand for its IPO (Thornton & Marche 2003). Perishable items and a misunderstanding of the Internet also derailed the business plans of Louis Border. Border had built a successful chain of bricks and mortar bookstores – Borders – and believed he could apply his success to grocery retail, creating Webvan in 1996 (Boyer & Hult 2005). Following the ‘get big fast’ mantra, he poured money into building vast warehouses and distribution centres in an attempt to corner the market, only to have limited shelf life and cost of delivery and wasted product put an end to his plans (Boyer & Hult 2005; Ryan 2011). The leaders of these companies lacked the vision of the technological genius; they were unable to see beyond their brand and understand how the technology sat within society.

The failure of Internet companies in the early 2000s was endemic. Websites were set up to broadcast the closure of companies and report rumours on the remaining time that other

companies had left; fuckedcompany.com<sup>88</sup> is a notable example, sharing gossip about the imminent demise of Internet companies in an almost celebratory fashion. The hedonism that characterised the rise of Silicon Valley's digital empire returned for its fall; the closure of companies and the laying off of all the staff that had migrated to the Valley during the boom were celebrated with so-called pink slip parties, where the pink dismissal slip employees were given acted as invitations (Johnson 2011). In line with the myth of the Internet, industry insiders often attribute the failure of many of these companies to the hubris of management teams. In his interviews with CEOs of Internet companies in early 2000, George Colony determined that "many of the dot-com CEOs lacked depth, experience, and common business sense" (Wired Staff 2000). The youth that was initially perceived as a benefit and a lack of experience led to people creating companies that were "not built to withstand competition, [were] not built to deliver sustained value, and [were] not built to last" (Wired Staff 2000). Once again, the failure was presented as a failure of the people rather than of the technology.

In the myth of the Internet, the ultimate demise of these companies serves as a cautionary tale. The crash had a significant impact on the economy, particularly in Silicon Valley: unemployment rose; companies vacated commercial premises, which drove down real estate prices; material assets were liquidated, flooding the market with near-new machinery and equipment that there was little interest for; related industry such as banks and law firms who had hired extra staff to cope with the demand of the new Internet companies suddenly had too many staff and the layoffs that began in Internet companies quickly spread (Johnson 2011). The crash stands as a warning to beware the frontier; it is the realm of intrepid heroes, digital savants,

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<sup>88</sup> The name of the website is a parody of Fast Company, a magazine that was established to cover the companies that were rapidly arising during the early Internet boom period. The website was made inactive in 2007, though it still exists [[fuckedcompany.com](http://fuckedcompany.com)], accessed 06/08/2019].

“natives” in whom “the dreams of Jefferson, Washington, Mill, Madison, DeToqueville [sic], and Brandeis [...] [are] born anew” (Barlow 1996).

## New Empires: the Humanist Internet

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been turbulent for Internet companies. Largely, the frontier has been settled. The technological foundations of the Internet had been established before the Dot Com Crash, and the new wave of 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital technologists are simply building cities – and fortunes – atop them. With this, the new digital technologists have worked to recreate the successes of the pre-Boom period, the successes of Lawrence Roberts, Bill Gates, and Marc Andreessen. The success of user numbers and effective technology converges with market dominance, where the most powerful companies are not necessarily the most economically wealthy but instead have high social capital and influence. Twitter, for instance, does not rate on Forbes 2020 list of valuable brands (Swant 2020) and is frequently rumoured to be up for sale amidst falling investor confidence (Bilton 2016) yet it remains a key site of social life; it is often where news breaks and political views are constructed, and founder and current CEO Jack Dorsey is often called before congressional committees (Dorsey 2018; Feiner 2020; Isaac & Ember 2016; Lucas 2018; Meyer 2020). This is not to say that economic market valuation is not a large part of what makes digital technologists successful; the only company in 2021 with a higher market capitalisation than Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, and Facebook is the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Statista 2020), and the founders of these five Internet companies occupy places within the richest ten people in the world<sup>89</sup> (Dolan et al. 2021). That these companies and these men – as they are all

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<sup>89</sup> Barring Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak of Apple, though current Apple CEO Tim Cook is at present the world’s 2263<sup>rd</sup> richest person. Microsoft founder Bill Gates is 4<sup>th</sup>, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos in 1<sup>st</sup>, Alphabet founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin are 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg is 5<sup>th</sup> (Dolan, Wang & Peterson-Withorn 2021). There are others who were involved in the founding of some of these companies – such as Paul Allen of Microsoft and Chris Hughes of Facebook – however these individuals are often disregarded within the myth of the Internet as founding a company is typically the role of one technological genius.

men – have come to dominate our economic and social spheres within the two decades that have passed since the Crash exemplifies the strength of the myth of the Internet. Any misgivings investors might have had after the Crash have either been assuaged or ignored as the valuations of digital technology companies continue to climb. Internet usage rates are climbing as well; according to the International Telecommunication Union (2021), in 2005 52.8 per cent of the developed world's population were Internet users, and by 2019 that number had risen to 86.7 per cent. We appear to show little interest in extracting the Internet from our lives.

The digital technologists of this period justify their place within our lives through the myth of the Internet. In this stage of the myth, practices are legitimated through reference to the conventions that were established in prior stages. Youth is understood as an asset, and failure remains a reflection of end-users rather than the technology itself; the historical narrative had bypassed the failures, leaving success as seemingly the only possible outcome for Internet ventures. The myth begins to reinforce itself, using its own narrative as justification. The Internet elite and their supporters hold to this, arguing that the Internet has proven itself to be an inherent social good, even if it occasionally goes awry; it is the humans that are fallible, rather than the technology.

The spatial conception of the Internet that was developed in the previous stage becomes central to the myth of the Internet in this stage. It allows the Internet to be understood as another world, a better world; no longer must we be restricted by our geographic location or our flesh; we can reimagine ourselves as someone new. The individualism central to the myth of America drives the creation of new Internet platforms, supposedly providing equal access to spaces wherein identity can be created. This digital utopia merges with neoliberal capitalism, and identity becomes a commodity, becoming more and more the creation of a personal brand as the years drift by. This, according to the myth of the Internet, is not a bad thing; it is an opportunity to succeed, to showcase the best side of yourself. It is also necessary; the Internet comes to rely on the data that flows within our immaterial connections, raising funds for the next technological revolution. Through a narrative thus far constructed to celebrate the social good of technological progress,

the myth of the Internet almost obliges us to participate. If we do not, we are cutting down the opportunities for those that come after us (Kelly 2010). The Internet is reinforced as the way of the future, a technological determinism we are pushed, both explicitly and implicitly, to believe.

The myth of the Internet not only has a particular conception of space but of time as well. During this stage, time is suspended; the historical narrative ends at the millennium, and the prospect of a future is always deferred. The endless iterations of Internet platforms mean that no project is ever completed, and by presenting themselves as always in the process of becoming, companies such as Facebook and Twitter are able to maintain the youthful identity of start-up companies despite being founded in the mid-2000s. This attitude invalidates critiques of their failings through the illusion of testing the waters and learning; in the myth of the Internet, mistakes are inevitable when you are still figuring out the rules and consequences of this new digital landscape. Internet companies can delay their own demise, disrupting the cycle of technological progress from earlier stages, through this eternal youth; Bezos has claimed that “Day Two is stasis, followed by irrelevance, followed by excruciating, painful decline, followed by death. [...] And that is why [at Amazon] it is always Day One” (quoted in Kantrowitz 2020, pp. 5 - 6). Alex Kantrowitz (2020) argues that this philosophy keeps companies such as Facebook, Google, and Microsoft – since Satya Nadella became CEO in 2014 – at the top of their respective markets. These companies exist within an eternal present; they have conquered the economy and the illusion of suspended time allows them to act as though their entanglement in our lives is unavoidably permanent.

### *Insert Vague Motivational Motto Here*

The Dot Com Crash reinforced the trope of the technological genius. Those who did not have the right type of vision failed, whilst those who were attuned to the network prospered. eBay, for instance, survived the Crash; its founder, French-American Pierre Omidyar, had understood that the significance of the Internet was its ability to connect people, something early users of the

ARPAnet knew. In 1995, Omidyar used the network to sell a broken laser pointer for \$14.83 USD, and within the year, \$7.2 million USD worth of goods had been bought and sold through Omidyar's website (Ryan 2011). Omidyar did not own these goods; he simply facilitated the connection for those who did. The potential customer base for eBay sellers was more extensive than anything they could have achieved by selling offline; they were not limited by geographic location and were more likely to find buyers looking for obscure items like broken laser pointers. Omidyar understood what Louis Border did not, that the potential for the Internet was in selling things that buyers could not already get where they live.

For eBay, what was sold was a connection. For Amazon, another survivor of the Crash, it was selection. Whilst Amazon's selling of books does not immediately appear too removed from Border's online grocery store, Amazon's success rose from its ability to offer more choice than a brick and mortar bookstore. Not limited by display space in a retail store, Amazon could stock a greater variety of titles in its warehouses and rely on a digital catalogue to facilitate sales. The success of both eBay and Amazon exist within the myth of the Internet as evidence of the viability of immateriality; the digital interface offers more potential than the physical one and is easier to maintain. The possible titles that Amazon can offer the buyer appears to be limitless, as each title takes up the same amount of space regardless of the size of the book or the quantity of a particular book that Amazon has in stock. eBay takes this even further, as it does not require Omidyar to have any storage space at all, as stock is kept in the individual homes of his sellers. Instead, eBay takes a cut of the transactions its sellers make; at the time of the Crash, the company was making massive profits in return for doing very little work itself (Bunnell 2001). That the company continued to make these profits after the Crash acts within the myth of the Internet as proof that the Internet remained a viable way to make money if one was able to come up with an idea of how to harness its lack of physicality.

After the Crash, this idea of immateriality comes to define the Internet. In the first decade following the Crash, the Internet companies that play a central role in our social lives today came



into being: Facebook was established in 2004; YouTube and Reddit in 2005; Twitter in 2006; Netflix in 2007<sup>90</sup>; and Instagram<sup>91</sup>, WhatsApp<sup>92</sup>, and Uber in 2009. What these companies all offer users is connection and selection. They do not offer physical goods but a space to talk to other people and an infinite array of information and entertainment from which to choose. They also offer, then, an infinite array of identities. Despite research that suggests our offline and online identities are not actually very different (Michikyan et al. 2015), the myth of the Internet proclaims that the Internet is a space wherein you can be whomever you choose; you are not bound by geography or flesh but by your own imagination.

An essential claim of the myth of the Internet is that it gives you the opportunity to join a community of interest, where you can meet like-minded people who may not exist in your neighbourhood, your city, your country. Zuckerberg's (2017a) manifesto claims that "Facebook stands for bringing us closer together and building a global community," connecting people with those they would not have met otherwise. He uses anecdotes to support this:

A woman named Christina was diagnosed with a rare disorder called Epidermolysis Bullosa -- and now she's a member of a group that connects 2,400 people around the world so none of them have to suffer alone. A man named Matt was raising his two sons by himself and he started the Black Fathers group to help men share advice and encouragement as they raise their families. (Zuckerberg 2017a)

These are, obviously, positive consequences of the Internet. They allow the myth to be perpetuated, feel-good stories that encourage us to believe that the Internet is inherently a source of social good. Rarely acknowledged in the myth of the Internet is how the network also allows for the radicalisation of individuals, connecting them to fundamentalist and other groups about

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<sup>90</sup> This is when Netflix began offering the online streaming services for which the company is now known. The company had initially been founded in 1997 as an online DVD rental service that would post DVDs to customers which they would then post back.

<sup>91</sup> Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Facebook acquired WhatsApp in 2014.

which they might otherwise never have known. When forced to confront the reality that this does occur, digital technologists double down on the tropes of the myth, claiming that the issue lies not in the technology but in the users and governments who are unable to provide clear legal standards and guidelines (Zuckerberg 2019). They often claim that the issue can be solved with more technology. This occurred after the 2021 January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection at the United States Capitol, when Zuckerberg, Dorsey, and Pichai were called to testify before Congress about the role their companies played in the event (Newton 2021a; Robertson 2021); they assured Congress that they were constructing better artificial intelligence that would be able to flag and remove content that encouraged anti-social behaviour, and pointed to the massive amount of content that they had already been able to remove. A similar response was given in the wake of the 2019 March 15<sup>th</sup> Christchurch terror attack, where the spread of the terrorist's bodycam footage was blamed on users continuously manipulating the video so that it could be re-uploaded each time the systems removed it (BBC 2019; Fingas 2019). In the myth of the Internet, the potential connections that people like Zuckerberg's Christina and Matt could make outweigh the connections that potential terrorists could make.

The ability of the Internet to connect people is understood within the myth of the Internet as a way to create a better world. This better world is often discussed on a personal, individual scale. Technology journalist Denise Caruso, for instance, remarked in 1996 that "communication is the fundamental activity that people want to engage in. [...] Everybody wants to call their mom and let their mom see them, or let their grandmom see them, or show off the kid" (quoted in Brockman 1996, p. 53). Caruso saw the Internet as a way for that to happen. In 2001, sociologist of technology Manuel Castells extended this idea, arguing that

if you want to know what happened in your city from the other side of the world, only the Internet is able to provide you with the information [...]. So, the freedom to bypass the global culture to reach your local identity depends on the Internet, the global network of local communication. (2001, p. 197)

In the myth of the Internet, the world simultaneously becomes bigger and smaller, giving you access to people you would otherwise have never met whilst also giving you access to the people close to you. Everybody gets transported to the immaterial world of the Internet, where distance is no longer a concern.

This immaterial world is, according to the myth of the Internet, inherently democratic. The basis for this belief comes from the early creators of the network; people like the students who collaborated on the Network Control Protocols and Robert Noyce and Gordon Moore of Intel represent a flat hierarchy, where authority is given to ideas rather than people. The myth of the Internet suggests this organisational structure becomes stronger as the network grows wider, further spreading authority for decision making between even more people. Journalist and author Craig Lambert argues that this idea can be “deeply disruptive,” as it speaks to the “power that untrained amateurs can wield, using the leverage of the Internet” (2015, pp. 101 - 102). Lambert argues that the Internet allows greater access to knowledge, which in turn devalues certain skill sets; areas of life that once required specific knowledge are open to everyone with an Internet connection, tearing power away from professionals and leading to what Lambert calls the “democratization of expertise” (2015, p. 102). This democratisation is the push behind Google Books, a program intended to provide easier and broader access to the world’s information by digitising and cataloguing every book in the world (Google Inc. 2019)<sup>93</sup>. It is also behind Zuckerberg’s attempts to provide Internet connections to those who do not have them; under Zuckerberg, Facebook has made multiple attempts to get satellites into orbit to improve the quality of connection in remote areas of the world, a move the company claims is “helping to bridge the

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<sup>93</sup> By making books freely available, Google drives down author royalties as the need to purchase the books is diverted. In recognition of this, Google will restrict how much of a book a user can view unless that book is in the public domain (Google 2021). This means either making the entire book inaccessible, or in cooperation with publishers, making a negotiated percentage of the book viewable. Google, however, still retain the data and have it catalogued in their system.

digital divide” (quoted in Dano 2020)<sup>94</sup>. Technology evangelist Kevin Kelly (2009) argues that open access to knowledge can only be a positive thing; Kelly goes so far as to argue that the Internet is perhaps more effective than any other tool we have to organise our society: “Operating without state funding or control, connecting citizens directly to citizens, this mostly free marketplace achieves social good at an efficiency that would stagger any government or traditional corporation” (Kelly 2009). However, this belief in the democracy-enhancing effects of the Internet has undesirable consequences, as Lambert (2015) points out; as our access to knowledge grows, it is easier to shift work from the expert to the layperson, freeing up company and state expenses by requiring consumers and citizens first to assist themselves. This is what Tom Nichols (2017) decries as the death of expertise. Once we have access to all the information on the Internet, we are expected to use it, to have it be the first place we turn to in a crisis; this is where Lawrence Robert’s 1967 threat to ARPA researchers that they would not receive new resources until they had utilised everything the network has to offer has found us. The ability of the Internet to promote democracy has also been deeply affected in recent years by inter-state cyber warfare; for instance, Russian use of fake social media accounts is accused of disrupting the 2016 United States presidential election by manipulating the algorithms that determine the prominence given to particular content. This type of election interference resulted in representatives of Facebook, Google, and Twitter being called before a United States Senate Judiciary hearing in 2017. For this hearing, the companies did not send their CEOs; Facebook instead sent their General Counsel, Colin Stretch, Google sent their Director of Law Enforcement and Information Security, Richard Salgado, and Twitter sent their acting General Counsel, Sean Edgett (Tau & Seetharaman 2017). These representatives were pressed to explain the extent of the foreign interference and why they were incapable of stopping it, with Senators suggesting that the revenue these companies received

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<sup>94</sup> These attempts have been fraught with failure. Notably, a SpaceX rocket that was to carry a Facebook satellite into orbit in 2016 exploded on the launch pad, destroying the satellite and delaying Facebook’s plans (Brandom 2016).

from the interference outweighed significant motivation to control it. These types of issues expose the immaterial world of the Internet as a capitalistic democracy, which despite what the myth of the Internet may encourage us to think, is not really a democracy at all.

Nevertheless, there remains a strong belief within the myth of the Internet that the Internet can be used in the fight for democracy. The most notable example of this is the Arab Spring of the early 2010s; a series of protests and uprisings spread across Arab countries as citizens grew disenchanted with their leadership's ability to solve worsening social crises. The perceived importance of the Internet to these events is exemplified best in Facebook – not the company, but the Egyptian child whose parents chose to name her after the company they saw as playing a pivotal role in their country's push for freedom (Smith 2011). Social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, is often described as vital to the pro-democracy revolutions that spread through North Africa and the Middle East (Huang 2011; Mourtada & Salem 2011; Sapra 2020). The story of the Arab Spring has been revisited in recent years, however, and reports suggest that Facebook and Twitter played a more minor role than what was initially thought (Aljazeera 2016; Guesmi 2021; MacKinnon 2016). Internet blackouts, a tool of government officials, inhibited the use of social media by protestors; lack of Internet access to communicate is thought to have actually been what brought citizens out onto the streets (Guesmi 2021). The role of social media companies remains in the myth of the Internet nonetheless, placing them as beacons of democracy and freedom. Similar comments championing the Internet and social media have been made regarding the #MeToo movement (Felsenthal 2017; Ohlheiser 2017) and the Black Lives Matter movement (Day 2015; White 2016) of more recent years. In response to foreign election interference, Internet companies reassure officials and the public that democracy can be protected through the application of *more* technology. This was a go-to solution for Mark Zuckerberg during the hearings on the Cambridge Analytica scandal, when Facebook was accused of allowing unfriendly outside forces to harvest user data and manipulate users with false campaign advertisements (The

Washington Post 2018a, 2018b). This type of defence is reflective of the technical imperative that underscores the myth of the Internet, where every problem has a technological fix.

### *(Don't) Be Evil*

In the myth of the Internet, there is a devout belief in the redemptive/salvific ability of the Internet to make the world a better place and make us better people. The companies that dominate the digital world position themselves as guardians of that belief, the faithful that will continue the mission even if everyone else drops away. Google's executive team, for instance, encourages its staff with the mantra 'Don't Be Evil'; when the company was incorporated into Alphabet, another mantra was added: 'Do The Right Thing' (Alphabet Inc. 2017, 2018b). These are the mantras of America's tech elite, not far removed from the 'What Would Jesus Do?' slogan that arose out of Christian America (Tomkins 2011). These mantras are vague; what counts as *being* evil, and what *would* Jesus do? These are questions intended for the individual to answer for themselves, as they become complicated when considering the broader society. After all, 'Do The Right Thing' is culturally connected to Spike Lee's 1989 film of the same name; Lee's film questions what the right thing is but ultimately leaves the definition up to the viewer. The film follows a young male African American protagonist as he experiences the fighting and rioting and, ultimately, the death that occurs when a local pizzeria owner refuses to include prominent African Americans on his 'Heroes Wall' (Lee 1989). The protagonist throws a trash can through the restaurant's window, inciting the riot against its Italian American owners. Was it the right thing to throw the trash can, the film asks. Was it the right thing to refuse African American faces a place on a heroes wall in an Italian pizzeria in a predominantly African American neighbourhood, it also asks. Alphabet's mantra is loaded with these types of questions, though one imagines that in 2015 when Alphabet was incorporated, the answer was skewed more towards consideration of the trash can than the racial implications. This is because the myth of America is universal, supposedly accessible regardless of skin colour;

the violence is condemned, but the structural racism goes unacknowledged (for a tiny selection of the issues Google has faced with race in the past: Clayton 2020; Noble 2018; Vincent 2018).

Despite this, the big Internet companies continue to push the idea that they are simply doing what is best for everyone. Sometimes this means owning up to their mistakes. Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, has admitted that Facebook has spawned unintended consequences, saying in regards to the breaches of privacy that occurred on the platform in 2018 that “we didn't take a broad enough view of what our responsibility was” and that “that was a huge mistake. It was my mistake” (quoted in Shapshak 2018). Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, similarly acknowledges the issues that his platform creates. During a congressional hearing called in response to potential election interference and political bias, Dorsey admitted “that abuse, harassment, troll armies, manipulation through bots and human-coordination, misinformation campaigns, and increasingly divisive echo chambers occur” on Twitter, and that this has the potential to impact the democratic process (Dorsey 2018, p. 2). There is a humility to the technological geniuses of this stage of the myth that was not apparent in earlier stages. Steve Jobs, for instance, was infamous for his temper and his so-called reality distortion field: he would frequently “shout at a meeting, ‘You asshole, you never do anything right’” (Isaacson 2011, p. 124), and it was also the case that “he laser-beamed in on you and didn't blink. It didn't matter if he was serving purple Kool-Aid. You drank it” (Isaacson 2011, p. 119). Marc Andreessen, whether intentional or not, comes across as a brazen young upstart on his *Time* magazine cover, where he posed in bare feet in 1996 (Jones 1996). The technological geniuses of this third stage largely came up in times of economic instability and their attitudes suggest they are mindful of the Dot Com Crash in the early 2000s (Greenfield 2012). They dress modestly – Zuckerberg's infamous hoodie is a prime example – and they do not engage in the kinds of excessive spending that the pre-Crash Internet companies did; those companies showed no hesitancy in spending record amounts of money on Super Bowl advertising in 2000 (Grimm 2011; Wired Staff 2000), whereas these post-Crash companies prefer to hoard their earnings (Stangel 2017). The Protestant ethic at work, this causes problems for society; as Rebecca

Greenfield (2012) points out, the money is not being put back into the broader economy, instead being spent on expanding Internet empires which perpetuates a concentration of wealth. Threats of higher and more diverse taxation of Internet companies have, of course, arisen in recent years, although these are often unsuccessful; when Seattle considered a per-head tax that would affect companies with annual revenue of over \$20 million USD, Amazon halted work on its new Seattle offices and threatened to leave the city which had been its home since its inception in 1994 (Neate 2018). The tax passed through the city council with unanimous approval, only to be repealed less than a month later due to a pressure campaign from companies such as Amazon and Starbucks (Beekman & Brunner 2018). The campaign argued that the tax would cause a loss of local jobs, and Amazon argued that the best way to combat the housing issues the city was facing was to encourage businesses to invest in non-profit organisations instead of taxing them (Johnson 2018). The repeal of the tax reflects a distrust in the local government to use the money wisely, instead leaving decisions on funding for these issues to large companies such as Amazon. Amazon's success becomes proof that people like Jeff Bezos are better skilled to manage society than elected officials; the technological genius is put forward as the saviour of society, justifying their disproportionate power in the political sphere. The myth of the Internet encourages people to side with the Internet companies, suggesting that they are the ones who will be able to fix the problems that the government cannot. Social media platforms further fuelled this belief when they began to remove President Trump from their services following the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection at the United States Capitol (Hern 2021); they were the ones able to affect change to the antidemocratic behaviour, whereas Congress failed to hold Trump accountable.

This belief in the financial prowess of technological geniuses and Internet companies is an important facet of this stage of the myth of the Internet. It is primarily built upon the economic success of the digital industry after the Dot Com Crash and particularly after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, where the Internet industry was one of the few to come out not only unscathed but better off. Google's profit, for instance, grew more than 50 per cent between 2007 and 2009



(Google Inc. 2009), and Facebook's profit grew a massive 265.9 per cent between 2007 and 2009 (Facebook Inc. 2012). Central to this growth is advertising revenue. In 2009, 96.8 per cent of Google's \$23 billion USD total revenue came from advertising (Google Inc. 2009), and 98.3 per cent of Facebook's \$777 million USD total revenue came from advertising (Facebook Inc. 2012). Selling advertising space is the result of lessons learned from the Dot Com Crash; as with Omidyar and eBay, the Internet elite understand that what they offer users is a connection, and they quickly discovered how to turn that into a product that could be sold to advertisers by exploiting the processes of immaterial capitalism.

Immaterial capitalism is a post-industrial capitalism that focuses on the social negotiations that occur within, and that produce, social relationships. These social relationships create a system of symbolic value, where, as Jean Baudrillard (1981, p. 64) argues, the economic value of an object is "inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged." This is the capitalism of financialisation and the debt economy, where value does not necessarily exist in reference to a physical or material object. The subprime mortgage crisis that caused the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 occurred on this basis; housing valuations grew not because of any physical improvements to the buildings but because of speculation and irrational exuberance (Berger 2017; Srnicek 2017). Speculative investing without the ability to understand the way rising valuations had led to rising mortgage payments that borrowers became increasingly unable to make caused the housing bubble to burst, and the investment value of mortgage trading plummeted (Betancourt 2010). The same thing occurred with the Dot Com Crash; the anticipated returns for all the new Internet companies did not occur, crashing the investment value of the market.

What digital technology allows is a more nuanced understanding of the structure and stability of the value negotiation that takes place within immaterial capitalism. Maurizio Lazzarato (2007) argues that the negotiation produces information and that the key to successful immaterial capitalism is control over that information. Digital technology makes this control possible; when negotiations occur digitally, they leave behind data that can be recorded and analysed (Betancourt

2015). Companies such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon leverage their large user bases to amass massive datasets, exposing trends and patterns of behaviour that can be used to anticipate market shifts. This is an extension of the first-mover advantage that earlier technologists such as Andreessen identified; where Andreessen was pushing to create standard-defining technology to ensure a monopoly that could be turned into future sales, Zuckerberg and his contemporaries are working to get biggest fastest so as to create the most extensive user base and create a monopoly over the flow of data. The early Internet companies were interested in what products they could sell to the end-user. In contrast, the new companies are focused on the information they can amass and sell to high-paying customers.

Within the myth of the Internet, the focus on amassing large datasets is beneficial not only for the Internet company but also for the individual user. The imperative for the company is to ensure the continuous flow of data, and they are impelled to continuously innovate new products and features that will keep users returning to their services. In line with their intentions to connect the world and provide everybody with a space to flourish, these new products and features are often targeted towards improving the self. Google, for instance, offers up the opportunity to learn and discover new ideas, and Facebook offers the opportunity to join different identity groups and showcase cherry-picked aspects of who we are to the public. We negotiate our identities on the Internet, using one another to determine who we are or might be as individuals. These possibilities are conditional on us providing companies with our data, however. In return for free access to identity building tools, we hand over information on ourselves that we may find difficult to comprehend. Not only do we give over the obvious, such as our names and our locations, but every click tells the Internet something new about us (Zuboff 2019). Within this digital immaterial capitalism, our identities become a web of consumable symbols whose value we negotiate as we move across the digital space.

The myth of the Internet ruptures here. Two different target audiences develop: one made up of consumers, those who use the Internet as a space for identity construction and connection;

and another made up of customers, those who use the Internet as a tool for data and profits. There is a reciprocal relationship between the two audiences, where the customers' fund the free access consumers enjoy, and consumers' provide the information that the customers want. At the centre of this relationship is data and, outside of the Internet companies themselves<sup>95</sup>, the biggest customer for this data is advertisers. The majority of the world's advertising dollars are spent on Internet advertising; Internet advertising overtook traditional advertising in the United Kingdom in 2009 (Sweney 2009) and in the United States in 2017 (Molla 2018). The myth of the Internet promises advertisers highly specific audiences; with large datasets, Internet companies claim they can ensure ads get put in front of the exact kinds of people advertisers are trying to reach (Hwang 2020). The claim is that this is more effective than traditional advertising, such as broadcast television advertising where audiences were much broader and more difficult to predict. By using targeted advertising, advertisers do not need to spend money showing their ads to diverse and potentially uninterested viewers but can spend their money more effectively by only focusing on their intended audience. Within the myth of the Internet, during economic downturns, such as the Global Financial Crisis, targeted advertising becomes a powerful cost-saving tool for advertisers to use.

While advertisers are being sold the idea of a cheap and effective marketing tool, consumers are told that targeted advertising is of little concern. If anything, it can make our experience of the Internet better. Privacy concerns around data collection are well-documented; the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018, in particular, is representative of the fears that Internet companies are illicitly harvesting data for nefarious purposes (Adams 2018; Carr 2018; Greenfield 2018; McKenzie 2018; Owen 2018; Wong 2018). Consumers are understandably concerned that Internet companies are tracking them across the Internet, cataloguing their every digital move.

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<sup>95</sup> Internet companies claim that the primary use of data harvesting is to improve their own systems (Schneier 2015).

Broadly, this is true; every action we undertake within digital spaces adds to the overall value of the datasets in which we are included. We make the data set more statistically significant when we interact with the digital space; our actions are commodified, from buying products online and communicating with friends to reading news and watching videos (Zuboff 2019). However, Internet companies claim that our individual data is worthless outside of the larger dataset (Schneier 2015). Advertisers merely get the opportunity to have their ads placed in front of targeted demographics rather than being granted unlimited access to specific individuals. Targeted advertising is good for advertisers and for us, we are told, as it ensures the content we see online is relevant to our individual interests. The myth of the Internet argues that we are okay with this; after all, if we were not, there are tools we could use to stop Internet companies from collecting our data for advertising purposes.

This part of the myth suggests we have more agency and choice than we do, however. Our data adds value to a product that is not our own; as we use Facebook, for example, we provide data that makes the site more useful for advertisers, whose advertising dollars grow the profits of the company and increases the attractiveness of Facebook for investors, further inflating the company's overall value and power. The effects of this power are obvious: the United States' Federal Trade Commission handed Facebook a \$5 billion USD fine in 2019 for privacy violations in relation to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, however despite this being the biggest fine that had ever been handed to an Internet company, dwarfing the \$22 million USD Google was fined in 2012, Facebook saw its stock price *rise* with the announcement of the fine (Kang 2019; Patel 2019). Facebook had made \$22 billion in profit alone in 2018, and a \$5 billion fine was simply a drop in the metaphorical bucket (Patel 2019). This is the tyranny of de facto monopolisation, as to use Facebook, one has no choice but to agree to its terms and conditions, which state that

when you share, post or upload content that is covered by intellectual property rights (e.g. photos or videos) on or in connection with our Products, you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free and worldwide

licence to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate and create derivative works of your content. (Facebook Inc. 2019)

There is no room to negotiate, and dissent is difficult. Facebook can track you and develop an advertising profile for you without you being a registered member; all it requires is someone who needs to record data and is willing to use Facebook technology to do so. In 2019, the United States Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown tweeted that “Facebook is already too big and too powerful, and it has used that power to exploit users’ data without protecting their privacy” (Brown 2019). On the face of it, Brown positioned himself against Big Tech, although he simultaneously had installed hidden Facebook tracking cookies onto his campaign pages (Azhar 2019). These trackers send data back to Facebook to analyse the patterns amongst people visiting and donating on the campaign page, a service Facebook advertises to politicians with information that can help them target voters. The key to the success of these trackers is that they do not actually require the visitor to the campaign page to have a Facebook account for Facebook to track and collate their data; even when you resist joining Facebook, you are unable to avoid adding your data to their datasets and improving their net worth. Even without us actively engaging with them, our Internet use allows Internet companies privileged access to record and exploit how we live our lives (Srnicek 2017).

Whether the average user sees this monopolisation as a cause for concern is debatable. Many do not know that a handful of larger companies own a lot of the smaller companies; *The Verge’s* annual American tech survey in 2020, for instance, showed that only 29 per cent of participants actually know that Facebook owns WhatsApp and that 66 per cent of participants have no issue with Facebook owning both Instagram and WhatsApp (Newton 2020c). What matters to users is seemingly based on their experience of an individual platform rather than necessarily who owns it. We have largely internalised the myth of the Internet and the possibilities it offers for us as individuals; the common refrains that ‘the individual’s data is worth nothing’ and that ‘one should not be concerned about online surveillance unless they have something to hide’

epitomise our relationship with the Internet companies to which we give our data. These are expressions of a pragmatic nihilism, where the belief that the individual can not affect meaningful change in the data harvesting process and the individual's self-interest collide. We accept the data cost associated with using services such as Facebook and Google for free, sometimes willingly, sometimes begrudgingly, because these services are of use to us personally. The individualism of the myth of America underscores our online choices and the myth of the Internet encourages us to believe that these choices are both our own and inevitable. The contradiction of these beliefs is supported by the ambiguity of the Internet and we cycle between moments of agency and surrender. That Senator Brown chose to denounce Facebook on Twitter is reflective of this; he appears to not see the irony in critiquing Facebook using a platform that has similar content and privacy policies. Like Facebook, Twitter also exploits user data: Twitter's privacy policy claims that they gather data "to make inferences like what topics you may be interested in, how old you are, and what languages you speak" so that they can "better design our services for [users] and personalize the content we show [users], including ads" (Twitter Inc. 2018). Politicians are seemingly as ensnared by the myth of the Internet as the rest of us; even outside of the United States, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden refuses to step outside the sway of Facebook, claiming that "we need to be present where people are" (quoted in Vance 2020).

The lack of desire to make substantial changes to the way that Internet companies operate within our society may be because, as a society, we have positioned the Internet as essential to our future. We have been socially indoctrinated by the idea of the technological imperative. For instance, we place extreme importance on digital literacy skills within our education systems, as though we have already determined that the future will be digital: in New Zealand, all schools had implemented a digital curriculum by the beginning of the school year in 2020 (Ministry of Education 2018, 2021). This curriculum focuses on teaching students from their very first year in school how to think algorithmically and engage in the "simple debugging" of non-computerised problems, through to being able to "understand accepted software engineering methodologies" by

their final year (Ministry of Education 2019)<sup>96</sup>. The New Zealand government claims that students need these digital skills to be “informed, responsive, and responsible citizens [and] to engage in society” (National Library of New Zealand 2019). This claim echoes the Clinton-era teachers in the United States. For New Zealand students, the government considers digital skills a necessity, equally as important as traditional literacy skills such as reading and writing, to secure a successful future. Of course, there needs to be more than just digital literacy in schools to ensure that our children are able to become “responsible citizens”; the digital divide is still significant with New Zealand society and access to the necessary technologies and network connections needed to reinforce what is learnt in the classroom are lacking in home environments, particularly in low socioeconomic areas (InternetNZ 2020)<sup>97</sup>. New Zealand is far from the only country focusing on the digital skills of its citizens; in the United States, for instance, the Department of Commerce hosts a website aimed at improving the digital literacy of the public. This website provides guides on basics such as how to use a mouse and keyboard<sup>98</sup>, through to information on how to use Twitter and set up a Facebook account, to coding and using Google Analytics to improve small businesses (<<https://www.digitalliteracy.gov/>> [viewed 18/06/2019]). UNESCO underscores the importance of digital literacy for the future. They claim that “digital literacy is a life skill because it targets all areas of contemporary existence” (Karpati 2011, p. 2) and that educators and governments must take measures to ensure that young people are able to “develop adequate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills” (Karpati 2011, p. 5). UNESCO goes so far as to claim that educators must themselves be adept with up-to-date technologies not only in their professional lives but in their personal lives as well (Karpati 2011). The Internet is positioned as the future, and through education, we create the necessary conditions for this to be so.

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<sup>96</sup> This is reflective of the technical enframing that concerned Heidegger (1977).

<sup>97</sup> And has gotten worse with the COVID-19 lockdowns.

<sup>98</sup> Of course, there is a certain irony in providing information on how to use a mouse and keyboard on a website that needs users to have those skills in order to reach it in the first place.

This is not to say that the relationship between politics and Internet companies is a one-way street. In order to maintain the suspension of time, the technological geniuses often present themselves as though they are just starting and getting a feel for a field they have been major players in for the past two decades. When thrown into crisis, such as after the 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal and the 2021 United States Capitol Riot, they show an apparent willingness to work with governments to mitigate the negative consequences of their companies. This is presented as though they are still learning and are asking for help, though it also acts to shift some of the blame for the problems to which their technology contributes. Zuckerberg has been a strong advocate for more government input, calling for governments and regulators to take “a more active role” to “preserve what’s best about [the Internet] [...] whilst also protecting society from broader harms” (Zuckerberg 2019). This position is tinted with frustration, however, as he wants “clear rules about who’s responsible for protecting information when it moves between services” and believes that Facebook “shouldn’t make so many important decisions” on its own (Zuckerberg 2019). Dorsey’s admission that “the threat we face requires extensive partnership and collaboration with our government partners and industry peers” (2018, p. 8) suggests that the problem of election interference and political bias are more extensive than Twitter, and thus that the public and governments should not hold Twitter solely responsible. The calls for collaboration as a solution for these problems distance the digital technologists from moral responsibility and allow them to uphold visions of a better future created as a result of a better Internet. This future is necessarily deferred, always existing just beyond tensions that we seem unable, or unwilling, to overcome.

The Pew Research Center found that, at the end of 2018, most American adults believe that digital technology companies are good at what they do and that they build products that are overall a net good for society (Gecewicz & Rainie 2019, p. 47). Most Americans also think that digital technology companies use their resources responsibly and are accurate sources of



information. These beliefs reflect the beliefs digital technologists themselves hold and perpetuate through the myth of the Internet. This idea that digital technology can improve society is central to the myth of the Internet, as it is used to override criticisms; as journalist Olive Burkeman argues, these companies and the myth of the Internet keep “luring us on with the promise of perfection and infinite choice” (2017). The argument here is that the Internet can revolutionise the way we distribute resources, eventually creating a social world where we do not need to argue over resources because they will be limitless. This may be why individuals within minority groups generally have a more favourable view of Internet companies than hegemonic groups (Gecewicz & Rainie 2019); the promise of the Internet is that it will make the world a fairer place.

The belief in limitless resources relies upon the immateriality of the Internet. When ideas and objects are reduced to binary code, they become endlessly replicable, a string of 0s and 1s that can be copied over and over without any effect on the original source. A piece of art, for example, can be repeated again and again, allowing everyone an opportunity to see it; each version can be precisely the same as the first one, with the original unidentifiable<sup>99</sup>. With this replicability comes a belief that the question of quantity can be set aside. We can always make more of an object if someone else needs access to it. The idea of infinite renewability supports an ideological belief that an ethical social life can exist within digital immaterial capitalism, as resources can be endlessly shared; Internet objects can be immortal, infinite, and continuously adaptable (Betancourt 2015).

Michael Betancourt (2015) argues that immateriality and replicability mean that Internet objects are not subject to the same processes of erosion as physical objects and that this is part of their value. Because of this, the selling of immaterial goods – data – is not considered to be a

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<sup>99</sup> There has been very recently a rise in Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) that represent the original versions of digital objects. These are certificates of ownership operating on blockchain technology, allegedly unable to be forged and traceable. Some NFTs have been sold for massive amounts of money; Jack Dorsey’s first tweet – the first ever tweet posted to Twitter – sold for nearly \$3 million USD in March 2021 (Lyons 2021). This move to privatise digital objects has little effect on the object itself however, as it still remains public and replicable on the Internet. The NFT is merely a claim of ownership and has no value outside of the NFT market.

“destructive consumption” (Lazzarato 2004, p. 199), as the exchange and consumption of these goods increases, rather than decreases, their value. Google’s value as a search engine comes from its ubiquity, for example; as more people use it, it grows more accurate and valuable and is thus worth more to users, advertisers, and investors. Whilst it is true that the immateriality of binary code means that Internet objects do not erode as physical objects do, focusing on the immateriality of digital objects within the myth of the Internet allows it to neglect its necessary connection to the material world (Smithies 2017). This, in turn, creates the illusion that the Internet offers a way to profit without physical expenditure. Facebook’s central product is a platform of connection, an immaterial space rather than a physical object. Even Internet companies such as Amazon do not rely on the physical product for the majority of their profit; Amazon’s Web Services are the source of 72.4 per cent of the company’s annual profits, and these services deal with the storage and analysis of immaterial data (Amazon.com Inc. 2018). Digital immaterial capitalism encourages the creation, sharing, and distribution of digital resources, and the myth of the Internet assures us that this is a social good and that we should ensure that it happens as much as possible.

The belief that one can profit without physical expenditure is problematic, as it reinforces the belief that the Internet does not face problems of scarcity or have any environmental consequences. The belief that they are immune to these things positions Internet companies and digital immaterial capitalism as a better and more ethical way to make money. The material side of the Internet is continually denied, pushed aside by “irrational exuberance” (Greenspan 1996) and the idea of achieving massive profits with little effort. Betancourt (2015) defines this denial of physicality as a type of pathological capitalism; it is a capitalism that disowns its own process of accumulation, believing that it can initiate a process of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1942/2010, p. 73) so as to continue on before it is destroyed through its own denial. The physical infrastructure of the network exists within earlier stages of the myth of the Internet; in this third stage, it is set aside. It already exists and therefore does not need to be discussed; rather, the focus is on the world we can build atop it. There is little interest within the myth of the Internet to

change the standard use of binary code or alter the protocols that dictate traffic movement across the Internet; this is the background work, of interest to technologists but of little importance to how the general public perceives the Internet.

By focusing on the immaterial data rather than the underlying systems and structures, this stage of the myth of the Internet disassociates itself with the material realities of those systems and structures. The binary code may not necessarily erode, but the physical objects that it is created, stored, and accessed on will. The machines with which we access the Internet are built to deteriorate. Apple, for instance, has faced fines relating to the “planned obsolescence” of their iPhones; Apple deliberately used software updates to slow down the processing rates of older phones when new versions were released in order to pressure users into purchasing the new version (Apple Inc. 2019; Deahl 2018; Gibbs 2018; Zhou 2018)<sup>100</sup>. Technology companies fight against proposals to legalise the right-to-repair, where companies would be forced to make repairing technology more straightforward and more accessible; it is estimated that United States citizens go through 23.7 million tonnes of raw material annually by purchasing new devices like iPhones instead of having them repaired (Bergen 2021). The material resources necessary to keep the Internet accessible are immense and unacknowledged within the myth of the Internet (Smithies 2017). The servers that host the Internet are built on the back of large-scale mining of metals such as gold and aluminium, the production of plastics that necessitates the consumption of crude oil, and they are kept running with massive energy costs and the maintenance of wiring. For instance, Amazon’s ability to supply its Web Services is dependent on massive server farms; its farm in North Virginia is responsible for hosting a large proportion of the United States’ Internet, keeping sites such as Instagram and Netflix online (Burrington 2016). We are encouraged to imagine

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<sup>100</sup> Apple claims that slowing down processing rates was necessary to ensure the phones continued to function when the batteries began to age. This explanation does not address why Apple chooses to make these batteries difficult to replace. The battery must be replaced by an authorised service centre, as the phone is built so as to discourage users from removing it themselves. There is a non-negligible cost to have the battery replaced, and depending on location it can take as long as 5 working days (Apple Inc. 2021).

ourselves storing information in the “cloud,” an ephemeral space with no physical ties, while actually our information is stored on physical servers that are not in the same location as – or owned by – us. Internet companies such as Facebook and Google command disproportionate levels of control over the data that we produce when we use their products, but it is providing data storage to hundreds of other companies and millions of individuals that makes Jeff Bezos the richest man in the world<sup>101</sup>.

The illusion of immateriality that is so central to the Internet allows us to forget how reliant on these resource-hungry machines we are. They exist within the myth of the Internet as, at most, necessary evils that enable us to access the inherent social good that is the Internet. As it is currently produced, binary code is meaningless to us (Betancourt 2015); we require physical machines to translate the 0s and 1s for us. Our meaning-making thus occurs in collaboration with physical digital machines. The inter-reliance of the immaterial and the material is extensive; we are only able to give meaning to immaterial information through our use of physical machines that, in turn, require immaterial programmes. Without an immaterial interface like a Web browser, for instance, the vast majority of us cannot make sense of the internet, and without some form of computer, whether that be a desktop or a smartphone, we cannot access that interface. The myth of the Internet obscures this relationship, choosing instead to emphasise the immaterial over the material.

The primacy given to the immaterial allows the myth of the Internet to take on a transcendental air. The disregard for the physical spaces and objects that the Internet requires to operate allows digital technologists to shrug off responsibility and accountability for the consequences of digital immaterial capitalism. Shortcomings with the technology are shifted onto the material, industrial manufacturing process – aging batteries in iPhones, for instance – or onto the individual digitally illiterate user. It is the user’s fault for not being able to access the utopia of

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<sup>101</sup> As at time of writing, 27/05/2021.

equality that the Internet represents; the technological geniuses build the tools, it is up to us to use them. The universality of binary code reinforces this image of social good and social equality. If our identities are constructed on the Internet, then our identities can be reduced to 1s and 0s; physical differences disappear within the code, a universal language that speaks to and of all of us. This is the legacy of the libertarianism of Barlow's (1996) manifesto, the claim that we can build a better world free of prejudice and tyranny; Barlow contemporary Kevin Kelly, who once claimed that Barlow would make an excellent Mayor of the Internet, "rallying our better natures to make a better internet city on the hill" (2018), likens it, in a telling rural and frontier analogy, to "barnraising [sic] a virtual commonwealth" (2010, p. 3). This narrative of a collective humanity is a way to justify the continual expansion of digital immaterial capitalism, allowing digital technologists to claim absolution from responsibility and unethical behaviour. Zuckerberg (2017a), for instance, claims that Facebook is working for the global community, for the benefit of the whole. He uses this to justify the extensive data harvesting that his company undertakes, data that will be used to draw in advertising dollars, thus allowing the company to continue to produce services that create, connect, and benefit the global community (Facebook Inc. 2012). That the global community that Zuckerberg calls upon does not actually exist is of little consequence, as the myth of the Internet only needs the very idea to justify the continual pursuit of profit.

## Three: The Carnivalised Internet

“This is like the world of technology: it knows its own immanent law, and it submits to that law in its impetuous and unrestrained development, in spite of the fact that it has long evaded the task of understanding the cultural purpose of that development, and may serve evil rather than good.”

- Mikhail Bakhtin (c.1920/1993)

It is well established that, despite what the myth of the Internet encourages us to believe, the Internet is not a paradise (for the tip of the iceberg, see Akrivopoulou & Garipidis 2012; Berry 2014; Betancourt 2015; Castells 2001; Davis 1998; Ellul 1988/1990; Foer 2017; Keen 2012, 2015, 2018; Lanier 2010; Morozov 2013; Pariser 2011; Postman 1985/1987; Scholz 2013; Taylor 2014; Turkle 2011). At the extreme, it amplifies hate (see, for example, Castells 2001; Taylor 2014), encourages conspiracy theories (see, for example, Castells 2001; Taplin 2017), and feeds terrorist and totalitarian propaganda (see, for example, Scholz 2013). On a more mundane, though no less concerning, level, it nurtures complacency (see, for example, Davis 1998; Gleick 1999), heightens anxiety (see, for example, Taylor 2014; Turkle 2011), and promotes precarious work and living situations (see, for example, Castells 2001; Lambert 2015; Rosa 2005/2013). A polemic detailing all the problems with the Internet in its current state would be endless, and many scholars, journalists, and general social critics are doing fantastic work identifying and communicating these problems to Internet users (this list of people includes, but is not limited to: Chang 2018; Foer 2017; Morozov 2013; Newton 2020a; Taplin 2017; Taylor 2014; Wiener 2020). Conceptualising the rhetoric of the Internet as a myth, however, opens up new possibilities for analysis. In his book *What Tech Calls Thinking*, Adrian Daub (2020b) examines this rhetoric and questions where it comes

from; had his book been published earlier<sup>102</sup>, it may have played a significant role in this thesis. Daub comes to many of the same conclusions and tropes that form what is referred to here as the myth of the Internet, such as the importance of the technological genius and the salvation narrative that underpins the belief that the Internet makes the world a better place. This is where Daub's analysis ends, though; he does not consider how the myth has been internalised not just by the Silicon Valley elite but by the population at large as well. To consider the tropes of the Internet as a myth suggests that the myth of the Internet not only is created by and has consequences for the Valley elite but also for the rest of us. Myths, as Barthes (1957/2012) says, are constructed to normalise ideas and behaviours, and through our engagement with the Internet we become co-conspirators, complicit in the continuing dominance of Internet companies such as Facebook and Google. This provides us with some power to change the myth; as co-authors we are given agency to edit the myth in spite of what the Valley elite would prefer.

To understand this process of co-authorship, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1933/1981, 1963/1984, 1965/1984, 1971/1986, 1990) provides a useful set of conceptual tools. Despite Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist's (1984) claim that he was reluctant concerning the idea, Bakhtin is primarily regarded as having been a literary scholar. His two major works published in English<sup>103</sup> – *Rabelais and His World* (1965/1984)<sup>104</sup> and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963/1984) – are both examinations of literary texts and focus largely on narrative techniques rather than the narrative itself. This focus on how things are said, rather than necessarily what is being said, allows his concepts to be lifted and used elsewhere; they can be applied to the myth of the Internet despite it not being a literary text. Bakhtin uses the structural features of the novels to identify and unpack discourses within text; David Danow argues that instead of considering Bakhtin a literary scholar,

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<sup>102</sup> It was released in October of 2020, well after the arguments in this thesis had been constructed.

<sup>103</sup> This thesis will focus on the English translations of Bakhtin's work as a result of my inability to read Russian.

<sup>104</sup> I use the 1984 Midland Book edition of the Rabelais text, published by the Indiana University Press, rather than the 1968 edition published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as this is the edition most readily available to me.

he is best understood as a “philosopher of discourse” (1991, p. 4). As a philosopher of discourse, Bakhtin’s concepts can be used within broader social critique. This has been done by many scholars, notably in post-colonialism and queer theory (Vice 1997).

To read the myth of the Internet through Bakhtin, three of his concepts are particularly useful: dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnival. These are perhaps not the most important ideas within Bakhtin’s wider body of work – Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990) argue that prosaics, unfinalizability, and dialogue are Bakhtin’s key concepts, and Sue Vice (1997) chooses to focus on heteroglossia, dialogism, polyphony, carnival, and chronotope – however, when taken together these three concepts provide a nuanced analytic tool for considering the co-construction of myths. Dialogism understands the social world and notions of truth as the product of negotiations between participants within society; this places the Internet elite and the Internet users in conversation with one another, where dialogue flows both ways rather than strictly from the elite to the rest of us. Heteroglossia describes the complexity of language and meaning and suggests that whilst the words we use may be the same, the meaning and value we load them with may not be. This ambiguity becomes weaponised in the myth of the Internet, as it allows the technological geniuses to cover their mistakes with a claim of misunderstanding and to also refrain from entering into too much moderation on their services; heavy moderation would throttle the data harvesting process, and it is easy to claim ambiguity of meaning as a reason to be cautious.

Whilst dialogism and heteroglossia provide a useful foundation, carnival is the paramount Bakhtinian concept for this analysis of the myth of the Internet. Carnival is a multifaceted concept, at once both a tool to articulate subversion and a tool to articulate oppression. It is dialogic and heteroglossic, a complex world that both maintains and shatters hegemonic order dependant on which side of the hegemony you sit. For the critics of the Internet, the carnivalised digital world is a way to trick users into complacency. For the heralds of the myth of the Internet, the carnivalised digital world is a utopia that smashes the barriers of traditional hierarchies. The carnival is, however, also negotiative. It is subversion and oppression at the same time, set aside from moral



associations of a social evil or a social good. This is the carnivalised digital world as the users of the Internet experience it; at once damaging and revolutionary, mind-numbing and awe-inspiring. To consider the fourth stage of the myth of the Internet as a negotiative carnival is to wrest ownership of the Internet away from the hegemonic elite. The monologism of critics and technological geniuses alike gets replaced by the dialogism of users and, true to dialogism, remains unfinalizable; the myth of the Internet remains an ongoing conversation, never able to come to an end.

Bakhtin does not conceptualise an ongoing carnival. He relies on a historical understanding of the practice, claiming that in the Middle Ages, carnival would naturally come to an end. It was always a temporary inversion, after which life would return to normal. Carnival can thus be understood as a liminal event; Victor Turner (1969, 1982) argues that liminal events are fleeting suspensions of the everyday, often serving a ritualistic purpose. The framework for an ongoing carnival can thus be found in the work of Árpád Szakolczai (2017), who, expanding on Turner, discusses the potential and consequences of a permanent liminality. Szakolczai suggests that permanent liminality is dangerous, as it continuously intensifies so as not to become mundane. This means a bigger, more violent spectacle where conflict escalates without hope of resolution. Life in permanent liminality can become overwhelmed by continuous existential anxiety and is characterised by a loss of control. To think of the fourth stage of the myth of the Internet in this way is to understand the Internet as existing in a state of crisis, where both traditional state power and technological genius are unable to contain and direct the digital world that they have spent six decades creating.

## Mikhail Bakhtin

As with all thinkers, Bakhtin's work is impacted by the social world in which he lived. The nuances of his concepts exist in the context he wrote within, therefore a brief consideration of his

biography is necessary. Born in Russia in 1895, Bakhtin observed the transition to the Soviet Union and experienced life under Stalin. Unable to commit to a critique of the Soviet regime for fear of retribution, he turned to medieval literature; these texts provided the distance necessary for Bakhtin to work through and understand the world around himself (Clark & Holquist 1984; Danow 1991; Dentith 1995; Emerson 1997; Gardiner 1993; Morson & Emerson 1990; Vice 1997). When read through Bakhtin's biography, dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnival become tools to critique the myths of the Soviet Union, exposing the contradictions between what the people are told and what they experience for themselves, and tools to examine the construction of power. When understood in this way, dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnival can similarly speak to the myth of the Internet and how it is used to create and maintain social control.

Bakhtin was born in Orel, a town south of Moscow, in 1895 (Clark & Holquist 1984). He married Elena Aleksandrovna Okolovich in 1921, a woman who would spend the rest of her life caring for an ailing husband; Bakhtin suffered from chronic osteomyelitis and, alongside acting as his nurse, Elena Bakhtin would take on odd jobs to financially support the couple when Bakhtin himself was too sick to work (Clark & Holquist 1984). A pivotal event in Bakhtin's life was his arrest in 1928 - 29<sup>105</sup>. Exactly why he was arrested is unclear; Hirschkop (1999) argues it was on account of his tangential relationship to the anti-Soviet religious philosophical group *Voskresenie*, whereas Clark and Holquist (1984) claim that Bakhtin's specific arrest, regardless of his connection to *Voskresenie* members, was instead to do with anti-intellectual purges in the Academy of Sciences. Regardless of the exact reason, it remains that Bakhtin was caught up in a volatile time in Soviet politics. 1928 marked the beginning of Joseph Stalin's first five-year plan, a raft of policy changes intended to save the Soviet Union from the steady decline it had been

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<sup>105</sup> There are conflicting dates as to exactly when Bakhtin was arrested as well: Hirschkop (1999) claims it occurred on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, 1928, and Clark and Holquist (1984) claim it was the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 1929.

experiencing under Vladimir Lenin's New Economic Policy (Kenez 2006). The purging of *Voskresenie* was to become part of a widespread series of purges, culminating in the Great Purge of the late 1930s. During this period, other mass arrests were made, notably the arrest of engineers in the infamous Shakhty show trial<sup>106</sup>, intended to dissuade anyone from attempting to challenge Stalin's power (Fitzpatrick 1974; Kotkin 2014). Arrest rates across the Soviet Union shot up once the five-year-plan was instigated, which John Scherer and Michael Jakobson (1993) argue was part of a strategy to increase the numbers of prisoners in work camps<sup>107</sup>. Bakhtin's arrest should be understood in this context, where arrests were made to silence religious and intellectual dissenters and sustain the massive industrialisation that the Soviet Union was going through at the time.

Many of those arrested as a result of the *Voskresenie* purge were sent to prison labour camps. This concerned Bakhtin's friends and supporters, as they were sure that his ill health meant that he would not return if he went to a labour camp. Following a campaign on his behalf, Bakhtin was ultimately exiled to Kustanai, a small town in Kazakhstan, for five years (Clark & Holquist 1984; Dentith 1995). The agrarian system that sustained Kustanai was undergoing significant changes at the time due to Stalin's five-year-plan, pushing farmers to meet new collectivist expectations; Bakhtin found himself welcomed into the community as he could provide bookkeeping skills, which he had learnt from his father, to the farmers that were struggling (Clark & Holquist 1984). With this work and the odd jobs his wife was able to find, the Bakhtins were able to survive in Kustanai.

Bakhtin's arrest had coincided with the publication of his first book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Art*. The arrest largely overshadowed the book itself; however, its reviewers

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<sup>106</sup> The Shakhty trial was an incident where fifty-three engineers were accused of conspiring to destroy the Soviet economy by blowing up the coal mine in which they worked. While the majority of the engineers were imprisoned, five were eventually executed. It is believed that this trial and others like it were a way for Stalin to purge industries where workers were not sufficiently communist (Fitzpatrick 1974).

<sup>107</sup> Many Soviet industries, such as the timber industry, were struggling with low numbers as workers preferred farm work because it was easier and paid more, and so prisoners were used as a source of cheap labour that was unable to protest against being put in less attractive employment.

became part of his bid for clemency. It would eventually be revised and republished in 1963 under the title *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. The development of dialogism that Bakhtin began in *Creative Art* remains important to his overall body of work, as it underpins most everything else he writes. To explain what dialogism is exactly though is difficult. Bakhtin himself was notorious for never quite pinning down his terminology (Morson & Emerson 1990), and the translation from Russian to English is never quite precise enough to be sure of Bakhtin's intentions. That dialogism is a conceptualisation of the relationship between two forces, this issue of translation is pertinent; the idea of an Other with which one maintains a dialogue is complicated by the limitations of the English language. The Russian words *chuzhoi* and *drugoi* can both be translated as 'other', although each has a slightly different meaning; *chuzhoi* is an alien other, whereas *drugoi* is closer to another person. The *chuzhoi* is antagonistic, constructing a dualism between the I and the Other. The *drugoi*, on the other hand, does not have to be oppositional, and the relationship between the I and the Other is conversational. It is through our engagement with the *drugoi* that we come to understand ourselves:

I am conscious of myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. [...] I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; *I must find myself in another by finding another in myself*. (Bakhtin 1963/1984, p. 287, emphasis added)

This 'I' cannot be dualistic but must instead be cooperative (Bakhtin 1933/1981). The *drugoi* is not always an external person; Bakhtin contends that we are constantly engaged in an internal dialogue and that different parts of ourselves speak in different languages. We rely on our multiple versions of 'I' – I-for-myself, I-for-another – to inform who we are and how we interact with the world.

The Other of dialogism is thus not the Other of dialectics. Whilst both terms place two ideas in conversation, Bakhtin argues that dialectics is a watered-down type of dialogism:

Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts

and judgements from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that’s how you get dialectics. (1971/1986, p. 147)

Dialectics offer an Aristotelian dichotomy, where an answer can be determined, whereas dialogism is lived, and thus an answer is never necessarily going to appear. For Bakhtin, dialogue is never-ending, unfinalizable, and therefore we ourselves are unfinalizable; we can never truly reach the end of our dialogue with one another without also ceasing to be. Dialogism means then, as Bakhtin scholars M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga put it, “faced with a choice of competing interpretations we must always choose both, as difficult and unsatisfying as that might be to our monological habits of thought” (1995, p. 16). Thus, dialogism is the complete rejection of essentialism and objectivism, of a monologism that rejects competing discourses and refuses to engage in dialogue whilst declaring itself to be the Truth (Bakhtin 1963/1984). Bakhtin’s arrest in 1929, after he had written the Dostoevsky book but before it was published, is symbolic of the monologism of Stalinism, and it is understandable that throughout his works, he continues to revisit and philosophize a dialogic alternative.

Bakhtin’s exile to Kustanai saved him from a prison labour camp and sure death and allowed him space to continue writing. During this exile, Bakhtin wrote “Discourse in the Novel” (1933/1981), the essay where his most thorough discussion of heteroglossia can be found. In this essay, Bakhtin stresses that language is best thought of as a multitude, where each person speaks their own language; he terms this heteroglossia. Heteroglossic languages, per Bakhtin,

are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. (1933/1981, pp. 291 - 292)

This is seemingly in contrast with monoglossia, a term reflecting a belief in a singular language and that this belief means others must know exactly what we are saying. Monoglossic language requires no interpretation; it is purely functionary, an objective description of the world. However, the two

terms are not dualistic; heteroglossic languages are centrifugal, decentralised languages that operate alongside and within monoglossic centripetal languages.

As they are not in opposition, heteroglossic and monoglossic languages are not necessarily good and bad. Monoglossic languages operate as a unifying force. They are, as Bakhtin claims, “socio-ideological: languages of social groups, ‘professional’ and ‘generic’ languages, languages of generations and so forth” (1933/1981, p. 272). Societies require a certain level of monoglossia to operate effectively, as to cooperate, we require at least a rudimentary understanding of what the other is talking about. In Kustanai, for instance, there were a multitude of languages as the town was home to many exiles and Old Bolsheviks, who, alongside the rural farmers, formed a diverse and at times contradictory social population (Clark & Holquist 1984). The variety of languages reflect heteroglossia, whilst monoglossia is reflected in the town’s social strata: the Old Bolsheviks share a monoglossic language that sets them apart from the other exiles and farmers, and within the Old Bolsheviks will be a variety of heteroglossic languages built upon each individual’s personal experiences. This interplay between centrifugal and centripetal languages reinforces the ongoing dialogism of the myth of the Internet; the power of the myth is in its monoglossia, although it is simultaneously the construction of an endless variety of heteroglossic languages.

The Bakhtins remained in Kazakhstan until the Great Purge in 1936 (Clark & Holquist 1984). Feeling the pressure of increasing surveillance in Kustani, Bakhtin and his wife chose to resettle in Saransk, a town much closer to Moscow, where Bakhtin was able to find employment at the local university (Dentith 1995). The Great Purge continued to make life difficult for intellectuals and so they left Saransk in 1937 for Savelovo, a town north of Moscow that was home to many former exiles and former prisoners (Clark & Holquist 1984). Savelovo was something of a mixed blessing for Bakhtin. For much of his time there, Bakhtin remained unemployed and in 1938, his leg was amputated. These things did allow him a plenitude of free time, however. Up until this point in his life, despite engaging in intellectual discussion groups, Bakhtin had only three published works to his name. The first was a short article on the connection between life and art;

this has since been published in English as the first chapter of *Art and Answerability* (Bakhtin 1990). Another was an article he wrote whilst in Kustanai for a trade journal, presenting economic figures for the collectivisation efforts in the area (Clark & Holquist 1984). The only major publication Bakhtin had prior to Savelovo was *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Art* (Morson & Emerson 1990). A lack of publications is not to say that Bakhtin was not writing; on the contrary, Bakhtin was known to have kept many journals filled with notes on various subjects (Dentith 1995; Hirschkop 1999; Morson & Emerson 1990). The political climate made it difficult to get his work into print, which in time would fuel the myth that Bakhtin was a genius gagged by the state; the strongest example to support this belief is the writing he completed in Savelovo.

Whilst unemployed and recuperating from his leg amputation, Bakhtin wrote a dissertation that he would go on to submit to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow in 1940. Titled *Rabelais in the History of Realism*, this dissertation is a crucial work in Bakhtin's bibliography. It expanded on many of the ideas that he was formulating in his published and unpublished works, such as dialogism and heteroglossia (Morson & Emerson 1990). In this dissertation, Bakhtin introduced his concept of carnival by looking at the low culture and folk culture present in the literary work of François Rabelais (1495 – 1553), an anatomist and writer known for celebrating the grotesque and fantastic in his writings. The dissertation was submitted in hopes of gaining a doctor's degree; however, Bakhtin's opportunity to defend it was delayed by the onset of World War II. It was perhaps lucky this delay occurred, as the Soviet Union at this time had just entered into the third of Stalin's five-year-plans and, with each plan more conservative than the previous, Bakhtin's work highlighted language and behaviours unfitting to Stalin's insistence on Soviet realism (Kenez 2006). The war increased the need for nationalistic propaganda, and Bakhtin's work likely would have been rejected because of this.

The war was also beneficial for Bakhtin in other ways: granted reprieve from serving in the Soviet army on account of his missing leg, Bakhtin was able to take advantage of the shortage of skilled workers to gain an appointment as a German language teacher and eventually as a Russian

language teacher in Savelovo schools<sup>108</sup> (Clark & Holquist 1984). As a former exile, it is telling that Bakhtin was once again allowed to teach children, something he had been barred from doing lest he sought to corrupt them (Clark & Holquist 1984). By being unable to defend his dissertation and thus keeping its contents out of the public realm, and through his successful teaching positions, there was no reason to think that Bakhtin was in any way an objector to the communist party leadership. He was eventually granted permission to return to his university position in Saransk in 1945.

The war had allowed for a certain reprieve on the strict cultural restrictions of the 1930s (Kenez & Shepherd 1998). Richard Stites writes that the culture that arose during the war was “emotional, personal, loose, relaxed, earthy, coarse, natural, spontaneous, free, autonomous, expressive, honest about death and suffering and heroism and hate” (1995, p. 4), considered something of a blessing by those who had suffered under Stalin’s insistence on Soviet Realism. However, this reprieve was not to last, and in 1946 new regulations were put in place that would restrict cultural expression to an even greater degree than the pre-war period (Clark & Holquist 1984; Stites 1995). Known as *Zhdanovshchina* after Stalin’s cultural ideologist Andrei Zhdanov, these regulations strangled the cultural and intellectual industry in the Soviet Union (Tomoff 2018). It was in this climate that Bakhtin finally had the opportunity to defend his dissertation. The *Zhdanovshchina* caused a division amongst his examiners; some thought the dissertation was profound, whilst others found it an affront to Soviet sensibilities. Unable to come to a decision, the examiners sent the dissertation to the Higher Attestation Committee for a final judgement (Clark & Holquist 1984). Amidst the ongoing cultural and intellectual reforms, the Committee

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<sup>108</sup> Clark and Holquist (1984) explain that teaching the Russian language was reserved for those the regime deemed suitable; it was considered purer than other languages such as German, and the Communist Party believed it was necessary to protect it from dissenters. That Bakhtin was able to gain a position teaching Russian signifies both how desperate the Soviet Union was for teachers during the war and how far Bakhtin had managed to rehabilitate his public image.



chose to reserve their judgment of Bakhtin's work, delaying their review until 1951, more than a decade after it was initially submitted. The dissertation was ultimately deemed to be a well-written piece of work, but one that was antiscientific and needlessly celebrated blasphemy (Clark & Holquist 1984); as such, Bakhtin was eventually awarded a candidate's degree, rather than the doctor's degree he had submitted for<sup>109</sup> (Morson & Emerson 1990).

Given his circumstances, it is not difficult to understand why Bakhtin scholars have read Bakhtin's work as a veiled critique of Stalinism. The concepts he develops are ones that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) denies. Life in the Soviet Union was not dialogic but monologic, with the Party's understanding of the world the only one given any official consideration<sup>110</sup>; anything else was rejected, even though the CPSU's understanding of workers' lives was often not aligned with the workers' own understanding of their lives. There was also a sense of the monoglossic as well, as the cultural reforms were intended to inspire a sense of unity and shared experience<sup>111</sup>; even during the relatively liberal wartime period, the idea that the people were as one was strong, with composer Dmitrii Shostakovich commenting that despite the war being hard and tragic, no one was "alone in his sorrow" (quoted in Stites 1995, p. 5). The shared experience of war carried into the post-war years through propaganda, and Stalin and his regime nurtured the idea of a national consciousness with the Cold War. Of course, this is the official position; amongst the people themselves, life was not monological or monoglossic. Shostakovich's comments about a collective experience of sorrow do not mean that everyone understood or experienced that sorrow in the same way. It is the ideology of the hegemonic group that was

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<sup>109</sup> The candidate's degree in the Soviet Union is the equivalent to a PhD in most Western countries today. The doctor's degree is equivalent to a postdoctoral degree. Holding a doctor's degree was the fastest way to become a tenured professor in the Soviet Union.

<sup>110</sup> This was not limited to the Soviet Union under Stalin; in 1961 a booklet published by the CPSU stated that: "Ideological and organisational unity, monolithic cohesion of its ranks, and a high degree of conscious discipline on the part of all Communists are an inviolable law of the C.P.S.U." (Communist Part of the Soviet Union 1961b, p. 5; see also Veselov & Vydrin 1974).

<sup>111</sup> Again, this was not limited to the Soviet Union under Stalin: "every Communist should observe in his own life and cultivate among working people [...] collectivism and comradely mutual assistance; one for all, and all for one" (Communist Part of the Soviet Union 1961, p. 20).

monologic, and Bakhtin would have been aware of this, particularly having lived in various exile and former exile communities. By pointing out the presence of dialogism and heteroglossia within literature, Bakhtin's work emphasised the lack of these things in the Soviet Union's official culture. He presented evidence of an alternative, contradicting the Party line of the natural supremacy of Stalinist communism.

Bakhtin's work remained largely unpublished until after Stalin died in 1953. Following Stalin's death, the official culture in the Soviet Union underwent a broad shift; Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, engaged the country in the process of deStalinization, removing criminal convictions from many of those considered to have been prosecuted unfairly under the Stalinist regime (Kenez 2006). The Soviet culture was liberalised, allowing artists and intellectuals more freedom to pursue projects prohibited under Stalin.

Despite the freedoms afforded by Khrushchev's policy changes, there was still a resistance towards publishing Bakhtin's work. Vadim Valerianovich Kozhinov convinced *Soviet Writer* – a publishing house in Moscow – to take on the Dostoevsky book by suggesting that it might become the next *Dr. Zhivago* (Clark & Holquist 1984)<sup>112</sup>. *Soviet Writer*, motivated partly by fear of losing another writer to Italy, particularly given that an Italian writer had already been in conversation with Bakhtin about publishing, agreed to publish Bakhtin's work. In 1963, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* went into print (Hirschkop 1999). With the generally favourable reception the new book received, combined with a renewed publicity campaign and various amendments to some of the debauched language Bakhtin had used in the original, *Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* was published in 1965.

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<sup>112</sup> Published in 1957 in Italy, *Dr. Zhivago* was written by Soviet author Boris Pasternak; the Soviet Union had denied Pasternak the ability to publish and were embarrassed when the book went on to win a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958 (Finn & Couvee 2014).

The remainder of Bakhtin's life after the publication of the Rabelais book is defined by his declining health. In 1969, he and his wife moved to Moscow, having been given a place in the Kremlin hospital (Clark & Holquist 1984). Within the year, they moved again to an elderly care home on the outskirts of the capital. Elena Bakhtin's health deteriorated rapidly, and after a brief hospitalisation, she died in 1971. Bakhtin's own health began to worsen at a more rapid pace once his wife died, and his friends and supporters eventually secured him an apartment in Moscow where he could access better health care. Bakhtin died in March 1975, in his Moscow apartment. According to Clark and Holquist, his last words were

ambiguous, since they can mean either that he was hoping to rejoin [sic] his wife or that he was going to God. In any case, he was doing as he expired exactly what he had done throughout his long life, going out to meet the other. It was a good death for one who had never tired of saying that the great dialogue never ends. (1984, p. 343)

Bakhtin's last words?

"I go to thee."

## Carnival, an analytic tool

Bakhtin's most significant treatment of the concept of carnival occurs in the Rabelais book. Bakhtin describes the carnival that flows through Rabelais' novel, a time in the medieval calendar when social life was inverted and strict social customs were abandoned for the free and familiar contact between all the people. Whilst drawn from literature, Bakhtin is adamant that the carnival he discusses is not just a literary phenomenon (Bakhtin 1963/1984). He insists that it was a historical reality and an important event where citizens were liberated from the oppressions of everyday life under the rule of the Catholic Church (Bakhtin 1965/1984). Whilst official life was "monolithically serious and gloomy, subjected to a strict hierarchical order, full of dogmatism, reverence, and piety" (Bakhtin 1963/1984, p. 129), carnival life was "a completely different,

nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, or man, and of human relations” (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 6). As a historical phenomenon, Bakhtin claims that these unofficial second lives were considered to be as equally valid as official life, and that, in some large cities such as “Rome, Naples, Venice, Paris, Lyon, Nuremberg, [and] Cologne,” people lived, on average, “three months out of the year” in their carnival lives (Bakhtin 1963/1984, p. 129). Carnival was ritualised, occurring habitually and in earnest, something to be experienced rather than witnessed.

Bakhtin’s understanding of carnival is, however, historically problematic. The carnival that he describes cannot be used as an accurate historical understanding of festive and festal life in the Middle Ages; as Chris Humphrey (2000) explains, to do so is to construct a monolithic interpretation of life in the Middle Ages and to falsely believe that the carnival described by Bakhtin was the only type of carnival that occurred. Whilst Bakhtin claims that the carnival he describes was typical of the Middle Ages, it remains that Bakhtin’s sources for this claim are sparse. After his 1929 arrest, Bakhtin remained out of the academy until a short period in Saransk in 1936 and a more permanent return in 1945; whilst he retained contact with various friends in academic positions (Clark & Holquist 1984), it is difficult to determine how much substantiated evidence Bakhtin was able to source for his work. It may be that he relied heavily on Rabelais’s work which, as a literary text, cannot be guaranteed as anything other than a fictional representation. This does not mean, of course, that Bakhtin’s understanding of carnival is without merit. Regardless of its historical accuracy, what emerges from Bakhtin’s work is a conceptualisation of carnival that can be used as an analytic tool. By abstracting it out from its proclaimed historic location, this carnival is simplified, no longer caught up in historical or geographic specificity. It can be identified as the trope of a Bakhtinian carnival, even if it is not a medieval one.

There are four central themes within the Bakhtinian carnival: communality, familiarisation, profanation, and metamorphosis. These themes describe what life becomes during carnival; they simultaneously act as reminders of what official life is not. Carnival acts as an important signal that

life is not fixed and that official life is not all that there is. There are alternative ways of existing in the world, both for the individual and the society as a whole. In its very essence, then, carnival is a critique of official life, exposing all the things that it refuses to be.

In the myth of the Internet, the Internet is the carnival. It is the alternative to an analogue life, as on the Internet the individual is freed from the flesh and allowed to live without boundaries. We can talk face-to-face with people on the opposite side of the world; this allows us access to a vast range of nonverbal communication, where our facial expressions can add things to the conversation that perhaps our words alone cannot. We can work from wherever we choose, no longer bound to a desk; recent COVID-19 preventative measures have shown the ways remote work can improve our productivity and wellbeing. We can consume entertainment with our friends synchronously without needing to be in the same room or even the same country, and we can access global shopping malls from our couches. This is the Internet read through the carnival as it is presented on the page; a straightforward reading, divorced from Bakhtin's own socio-cultural context. However, this does not invalidate it, as it remains an optimistic narrative of how the status quo can be subverted. It is a carnival full of potential and possibility, unfazed by conventional power hierarchies. The Internet carnival was imagined in the second stage of the myth of the Internet, with libertarian declarations like John Perry Barlow's (1996) proclaiming the existence of a life beyond the industrialised world; during that second stage, the myth was oppositional, a challenge to the traditional elite. It promised freedom, liberty, and equality; it promised access to an America as it could be, as it should be.

## *Communality*

The theme of communality determines the boundaries of carnival: in short, there are none. Carnival is a transformation of the whole social world, and everyone is expected to participate, regardless of their role in official life. Peasants and nobles alike would gather in the town square

to share in the festivities, eating and drinking with no thought for the social rules that usually kept them apart. In this way, carnival seeks to transform a society into a community, reminding everyone of their commonalities and providing a shared experience around which everyone could congregate.

According to Bakhtin, the carnival was not a street party or a parade that one could simply walk away from or shut out by closing their door. It “invaded” the city, its very presence compelling people to participate (1963/1984, p. 128). Participation was universal; there were no performers nor audience, no stage that could be exited. It was a complete rejection of social roles and the hierarchy that those roles inform. This is what, in the myth of the Internet, the Internet also represents: a life no longer defined by the distribution of power into traditional social classes, a life where you can be successful regardless of your background, your age, your experience. The early digital noticeboards used to design the protocols for the ARPAnet are representative of this belief, as are the structure of companies such as Intel, spaces where the hierarchy was flat and it was assumed that the best ideas would naturally rise to the top (Campbell-Kelly et al. 2013; Freiburger & Swaine 2000; Ryan 2011). Today’s platforms claim that they take this idea of community even further, extending it out to everyone and not just those with technical know-how. For instance, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offer users unprecedented access to politicians; they can be contacted in the same way that you would contact a friend or a neighbour, power-defined spaces like offices no longer necessary (Papaloi et al. 2012; Towner 2012). These types of platforms also offer users the ability to participate in the construction of media, both in the sense of impacting the decisions of broadcast media creators and in creating media without the participatory boundaries inherent in traditional media practices. Fan communities have utilised social network platforms to organise campaigns to save television shows from cancellation and to protest for changes to industry tropes (Navar-Gill & Stanfill 2018): executives at NBC chose to reverse their 2017 decision to cancel sci-fi show *Timeless* after a coordinated fan base bombarded them with the hashtag #ResuscitateTimeless (Lanter 2017); and hashtag campaigns such as

#LGBTFansDeserveBetter and #BlackLGBTDeserveToBe trended in 2016 as responses to the killing off of queer characters in shows such as *The 100* and *Orange is the New Black*, taking aim at the broader ‘Bury Your Gays’ trope that exists within mainstream narratives as a demand for queer characters to be treated as more than plot devices (Navar-Gill & Stanfill 2018). Users are also able to disrupt traditional media practices by creating their own content. Participatory boundaries such as production costs and financial returns for investors are removed: Instagram offers users the ability to create and edit short video content with their Reels feature, whilst YouTube offers the free publication of video content, allowing users to create and show content to massive audiences without requiring large amounts of initial capital or access to film and television studios (Smith 2012). The myth of the Internet argues that it creates a space wherein everyone has access to possibilities that in a non-digital world would be restricted. The Internet is imagined as the carnival, a space where no one is left out.

Universal participation in carnival serves a humanist agenda. It provides a sense of togetherness, where we are unified in our human existence. Bakhtin claimed that during carnival, “the individual [felt] that [they were] an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body” (1965/1984, p. 255); we become as one, joined in the understanding that regardless of our differences we are in this place, at this time, together. This is the same feeling that Mark Zuckerberg seeks to invoke in us when he talks about building a global community (Zuckerberg 2017a, 2017b; Zuckerberg & Bono 2015). He encourages us to remember that we share a common humanity, and we are obligated to do all that we can to nurture and progress our shared vision of a better future for all. That Bakhtin’s mass body is one of continual renewal, represented by the carnival imagery of the pregnant senile hag<sup>113</sup>, is reflected in Zuckerberg’s

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<sup>113</sup> The pregnant senile hag represents a body at opposing stages in its life: dying and giving birth.

mission to spread the Internet as far as possible; the spread of the network is the rebirth of a fractured physical world into a singular digital space.

## *Familiarisation*

With communality comes familiarisation. The singular mass body of carnival is intimate, each participant in tune with one another. Contact that is typically reserved for friends and family becomes appropriate contact for strangers; physical and emotional displays are encouraged in every form, the sanctity of the religious mind pushed aside in favour of the body's base drives, desires, and functions. This encouraged interactions beyond the official separations of “caste, property, profession, and age” (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 10), showing these categories to be socially constructed and negotiable, opening new possibilities for social interactions. According to Bakhtin, carnival life is where a heteroglossic array of languages crashes together, and the dialogism of “carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (Bakhtin 1963/1984, p. 123).

During carnival, people are “reborn” for “purely human relations” (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 10), and the myth of the Internet claims that the Internet is a space for this rebirth to occur. The individual is able to reimagine their identity in the digital world, to reconfigure their sense of self by accessing new information and choosing which parts of themselves to prioritise and which parts to omit. Facebook, for example, claims it allows us to share only as much of ourselves as we want to, and that we can decide who we share ourselves with. We willingly upload photos or thoughts and can use the tools Facebook provides to ensure our content is only shown to friends, or to family, or to anyone and everyone. When questioned on Facebook’s privacy policies, Mark Zuckerberg argues that users only share the things they want to share (The Washington Post 2018a, 2018b). The user has the agency to pick and choose their own identity; Facebook simply provides



the tools with which to do so<sup>114</sup>. This is possible because of the connections of the network. Our rebirth occurs in connection with others. Our identity is constructed upon social negotiations, and we are reliant on the vast social connections the Internet provides to maintain these identities; without the possibilities contained within the network, these versions of us cannot exist.

As a non-physical space, the Internet does not offer the bodily experience of carnival in the same way that Bakhtin describes. Indeed, the myth of the Internet offers freedom from the flesh, whereas Bakhtin's carnival participants revel in it. Thus, the digital carnival goes beyond boundaries that Bakhtin's does not and cannot; the participants in Bakhtin's carnival occupy a singular geographic location, a town or a city, whereas the digital carnival transcends geography, operating on a global scale<sup>115</sup>. The physical familiarity of the local is replaced with an immaterial universality, where each person is exchangeable for the next; this is the goal of technology that Heidegger (1954/1977) warned of, where humans are understood as standing-reserve, waiting to have our value extracted.

## *Profanation*

Bakhtin (1965/1984) argues that the profanation of carnival is grounded in familiarity rather than malice. It is a recognition of our earthly relationship with one another, where decisions and systems are created by living, breathing people instead of unknowable or divine forces. This is emphasised through an exaggerated focus on the body, particularly “the belly and the reproductive organs” (1965/1984, p. 21); through these parts of the body, cycles of life and death occur, a process of degradation that highlights the unfinalizable nature of living. The process of

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<sup>114</sup> Like much within the myth of the Internet, these claims are oversimplified and uncritical. There will be things that platforms do not permit us to share, and there will be things which are shared despite our wishes that they are not.

<sup>115</sup> It falls short of this objective, however, as nation states are able to dictate how much of the Internet their citizens are able to access. The myth of the Internet neglects these divergences, unless considering these outside spaces as spaces which still remain to be conquered.

profanation within carnival also serves to negate official social barriers; in this way, it is monoglossic, as it serves as a common language for all social strata and binds them as a singular group. Profanation exists within carnival to remind participants that the seemingly fixed structures of their official lives do not accurately reflect the commonalities that they share.

In the myth of the Internet, the profanation that occurs across the network is similarly enlightened. It is light-hearted recognition of the contingency of dogmas and beliefs. This is reflected in the parody religion of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, for example, an Internet phenomenon from 2005 that has continued to make headlines. Created by Bobby Henderson, the religion of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was written initially to challenge the teaching of intelligent design in Kansas, USA, biology classes (Langton 2005; Vergano 2006). Henderson's letter to the Kansas State Board of Education went unacknowledged until it began to make headlines due to its popularity on the Internet; the letter suggested that alongside evolution and intelligent design, schools should teach students about the Flying Spaghetti Monster, an alternative theory of how the universe came to be. The tone of the parody was well-received on the Internet and spread rapidly, becoming a symbol of challenging the power of Christianity in the public realm (Langton 2005; Spiegel 2005; Vergano 2006). Adherents acknowledge the fictitious nature of their deity; this does not stop them claiming colanders as religious headgear in official identification photos (AP 2016; BBC 2016b; Criss 2017); the Flying Spaghetti Monster has come to represent the contingency of religious beliefs by not taking its own religious claims seriously. Had he not posted it on his website, Henderson's creation would have languished in obscurity<sup>116</sup>.

The contingency of transcendent power exemplified by carnival's profanation reinforces the focus on the earthly body. It is a body that exists in a constant state of renewal: "to degrade is

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<sup>116</sup> Not everyone was receptive to the Flying Spaghetti Monster of course; Henderson receives hate mail that he proudly displays on the official Flying Spaghetti Monster website: <https://www.spaghettimonster.org/category/hate-mail/> [viewed 01/06/2021]

to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 21). The immateriality of the myth of the Internet complicates this process, however. The Internet co-opts the language and image of the body whilst rejecting the body itself; it is profanation without reference, a grotesque without weight. In the digital carnival, the celebration of the flesh becomes the celebration of the self, as the self is destroyed and reborn as the user moves across the Internet space. The bodily renewal of Bakhtin’s carnival becomes the disembodied renewal of the content that creates the self. Where Bakhtin’s carnival participants revelled in food and feasts as a reflection of consumption and defecation, the participants in the digital carnival revel in photos, videos, and tweets, taking them up only to discard them soon after. The parts of ourselves that we choose to share on the Internet become the fuel for the universal carnival body; the content which makes up our selves is endlessly replicable, infinitely renewable so that it can be shared with everyone. Even as it is infinitely renewable, the content is infinitely replaceable. There is a tension here, as content on the Internet is both permanent and ephemeral, a renewable source of energy that we continuously consume and defecate. This process is enacted each time a comment or action is dredged up from someone’s past. For instance, some of Zuckerberg’s old emails were unearthed in 2019 during a Federal Trade Commission investigation into the Cambridge Analytica scandal (McKinnon et al. 2019); the emails sparked rumours and conspiracies regarding the actions of Zuckerberg and Facebook in the early 2010s in relation to user privacy. The process of course happens for average users as well. AP news associate Emily Wilder was fired from her job 16 days after it began and it is widely believed that an old social media post was the cause (Barr 2021); in college, Wilder had voiced support for Palestine and her posts were dug up by the group Stanford College Republicans in 2021, causing outrage amongst conservative news outlets. Old, presumably forgotten content resurfaces, creating a new stream of data as people rush to respond. This renewability becomes problematic for carnival, as it can never run out. The feast never needs to end, as food keeps being bought to the table.

## *Metamorphosis*

When we engage in a process of communality, familiarisation, and profanation, metamorphosis occurs. We become carnivalised, shifting from the official narrative of the world to one where “all things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations” (Bakhtin 1963/1984, p. 123). Metamorphosis exposes the relativity of life, presenting a challenge and an alternative to official life and the hierarchy therein. It is the culmination of a variety of carnival practices, including carnival’s emphasis on laughter, abusive language, the Carnival King, and temporality. The process of carnivalisation is thus symbolic of one of the primary purposes of carnival: to respond to and overcome the terrors of official life.

The importance of laughter to carnival cannot be understated. Carnival laughter is mocking and joyful, a way to strip terror of its power by transforming it into something absurd. The grotesque body, for instance, becomes the comic body, a body that laughs at the seriousness of the official life. It is a parody of birth and death, showing characteristics of both at the same time; as an example, Bakhtin points to the “senile pregnant hags” in the Kerch terracotta collection<sup>117</sup>, and he emphasises the fact that, whilst representing “a death that gives birth,” the hags are laughing (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 25). The pregnant hags are a parody of a belief in endings and ultimate truths, and the same attitude pervades carnival life. Bakhtin links the grotesque with laughter throughout his work, particularly emphasising the way in which the grotesque exists as a parody of official life. The grotesque is earthly rather than heavenly, the realm of humans rather than God. The cosmic terrors of death and hell are things no longer to fear during carnival, overcome through key carnival set pieces that will be ritually set on fire at the height of the carnival. The hell set piece is “one of the indispensable accessories of carnival,” Bakhtin (1965/1984, p. 91) argues, despite its

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<sup>117</sup> Kerch was an Ancient Greek colony that now exists as a major city in Crimea.

typically grim and grotesque nature; participants know that it will be destroyed and so it holds no fear over them, becoming an object instead to be mocked. For Bakhtin, carnival laughter is directed at everyone and everything, a universal laughter in which everyone takes part. Laughter is a “destabilizing power” (Gilhus 1997, p. 10), able to disrupt attempts to control it. Nothing is sacred during carnival, and nothing escapes the carnival laughter, showing that official life cannot retain its power of fear across contexts.

Laughter within the digital carnival is equally euphoric. Official power is mocked through parody and sarcasm, with the network's broad reach giving an unprecedented strength and speed to the laughter. A politician's tweet, for instance, can become an instant target; an infamous example is President Trump's (2017) “covfefe” tweet of 2017<sup>118</sup>, which became a hashtag shared over 1.4 million times in the 24 hours after the initial tweet (Sini et al. 2017). The exact meaning of covfefe is unclear, though it is speculated it was a mistyping of the word ‘coverage’. Trump deleted the tweet within six hours, though it remains a rallying point for the mocking and critiquing of Trump on the Internet (Estepa 2018; LaFrance 2019). The laughter of carnival is not just reserved for those who have power in official life but also for the official lives of users themselves. Memes are a common tool used to present struggle as humorous; Kristine Ask and Crystal Abidin (2018, p. 841) point to the exaggeration of the struggles of official life in memes as a way to add a certain “flexibility to the statement by allowing for multiple interpretations.” The laughter is available to all, as some users see memes as the presentation of “relatable experience in a humorous way, others simply [see] them as exaggerated for the sake of entertainment and not really referring to real-life situations. In this way, humour fuels the memes' virality by expanding their relatability”

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<sup>118</sup> This tweet and Trump's entire Twitter account were deactivated in January 2021 by Twitter after the Capitol insurrection. The tweet still exists in a web archive at:  
<[https://web.archive.org/web/20170531054122if\\_/https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/869766994899468288](https://web.archive.org/web/20170531054122if_/https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/869766994899468288)> [viewed 03/06/2021]

(Ask & Abidin 2018, p. 841). The contrast between official life and carnival life is exposed through memes, such as this one that has been ‘liked’ over 400,000 times and shared over 100,000 times:

I forgot you cant make depression jokes outside of twitter lmao my coworker was like ‘you ready for this year to be over?’ I was like ‘im ready for this life to be over’ he was like bro what [sic] (Bolin 2017)

The laughter of the meme is carnival laughter, and it is often laughter directed at the self.

The language of carnival laughter is often abusive in its self-deprecation. The role that abusive language, and abuse more generally, plays in carnival is complex. Bakhtin argues that abuse is indelibly linked with praise and that the two are “so to speak, the two sides of the same coin” (1965/1984, p. 165). Carnival does not separate the two, Bakhtin claims, but provides both at once. Whilst it draws on the profane and grotesque, the so-called “billingsgate”<sup>119</sup> (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 165) language of carnival simultaneously places these within the realm of familiarity, creating a language that uses “insulting words or expressions” in an “affectionate and complimentary sense” (Bakhtin 1965/1984, pp. 16, 165). The abusive language of carnival becomes something of an equaliser; it reinforces the dissolution of hierarchy and distance that occurs during carnival by being aimed at every participant regardless of their role in official life. By disregarding the hierarchies of official life, carnival’s abusive language operates as a response to terror, where terror is overcome through the use of satirical affectionate abuse.

The complexities of this type of abusive language are arguably one thing that makes content moderation on the Internet so difficult. When typed, it is challenging to detect nuance in speech; sarcasm may appear genuine, for instance, as typical social cues are absent (Wilson & Land 2021). Eric Goldman argues that content moderation systems lack the “extrinsic information” necessary to determine the intention behind speech (quoted in Vincent 2019). The body of the

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<sup>119</sup> The term billingsgate comes from the centuries-old Billingsgate fish market in London which is well-known for the crude language used by its merchants and patrons.

digital carnival is the body of Bakhtin's carnival, a body that is "not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 26); it exists beyond itself, with potentials for speech and meaning outside of its boundaries. This challenges attempts at moderating and regulating speech on the Internet, as these types of policies reject the ambivalence and ambiguity of carnival. There are complexities and contradictions here, however: the myth of the Internet holds that the Internet was created to bring order to chaos, that is, to end carnival, by bringing together disparate systems and programming languages in order to make them legible to one another; the myth of the Internet also holds that the Internet is a space of freedom and liberty, necessarily chaotic as it pushes together users from all walks of life, that is, to create carnival. Platforms such as Facebook streamline the chaos of earlier spaces such as Myspace, swapping the haphazard, user-designed pages full of colour, sounds, and images<sup>120</sup> for simplistic profiles with tick boxes and a singular blue theme. Where Myspace offered tools for users to create unique profile pages, Facebook attempts to universalise difference by insisting on formulaic pages. Facebook's content moderation issues (see for example: Koebler & Cox 2018; Marantz 2020; O'Neil 2021; Patel & Hecht-Felella 2021) exist in this tension between order and chaos; the myth of the Internet pushes Facebook to find balance, and if the structure is ordered then, by necessity, the content is chaotic.

Another way that abuse is utilised within carnival is through the crowning and de-crowning of the Carnival King. The figure of the Carnival King is symbolic of carnival's inversion of official life: it is the person who in official life is the social opposite of the King that gets crowned during carnival. Unlike the official King, the Carnival King is determined through an election at the beginning of carnival, and when the carnival ends, he is de-crowned through a process of abuse;

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<sup>120</sup> Journalist Lauren Bravo (2019) has dragged up some old images of Myspace profiles in her article discussing the loss of data that occurred when the company shifted to new servers. Bravo argues that the loss of this data is an issue as the data serves as a digital time capsule of the social lives of young adults in the 2000s, and contains a trove of old photos and music from Myspace's heyday.

by beating him, the crowd turns the Carnival King “once more into a clown” (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 197). Bakhtin argues that the Carnival King’s crowning and de-crowning operates as “a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position” (1963/1984, p. 124). Like with abusive language, the Carnival King is used as a tool to overcome terror; the relativity of the official King is exposed and mocked by the election and de-crowning process, and the Carnival King acts as a way for the people to “play with terror and laugh at it” (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 91).

The Carnival King in the digital carnival is a problematic figure. As the Internet operates as the alternative world of carnival, the role of king necessarily goes to someone like Jeff Bezos or Mark Zuckerberg. The idea that in official life these men would be at the bottom of a social hierarchy is not something that can be proven, although it is an idea that is encouraged. It provides them with an air of the every-man, the one who becomes successful because of his merit rather than through inheritance. This idea is played out in the trope of the nerd: bullied and rejected, the nerd will ultimately triumph when society realises that intellect is a person’s most valuable asset (Fan 2014; Graham 2003; Roeder 2013). Best exemplified in Jeff Kanew’s 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984)<sup>121</sup>, the trope suggests that the nerd will overcome their adversaries and claim their rightful place atop the social totem pole. The notion that nerds are naturally superior is amplified within the myth of the Internet. For example, despite any damage it may have done to his reputation, David Fincher’s film *The Social Network* (2010) served to place Zuckerberg as the eventual winner of a battle where his brains were pitted against the brawn of the Winklevoss twins<sup>122</sup>; “I’m 6’5, 220, and there’s two of me,” Tyler Winklevoss exclaims when it is discovered

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<sup>121</sup> As of 2020, this film is slated for a reboot by Seth MacFarlane and the Lucas brothers (Rubin 2020).

<sup>122</sup> *The Social Network* (2010) does not portray Zuckerberg in a particularly positive light, suggesting that he sold out his friend and business partner Eduardo Saverin, disparaged his (ex)girlfriend, and cheated his way to creating Facebook. Zuckerberg rarely comments on the film, but claims that it is not reflective of the reality of the situation;



that Zuckerberg had mislead the twins and allegedly stole their idea. Zuckerberg's intelligence and quick thinking enabled him to succeed where the Winklevoss twins failed. This suggests that despite the power of people like the Winklevoss twins in official life – they represented the United States when they rowed in the 2008 Beijing Olympics and were members of the elitist of Harvard's social clubs, the Porcellian Club and the Hasty Pudding Club – the technological genius of people like Zuckerberg takes control in carnival life.

If, however, someone like Bezos or Zuckerberg take the role of the digital Carnival King, they can be expected to fall from power eventually. The Carnival King is ritually abused to mark the return of traditional life and show that not even the King is above judgment. However, the digital carnival has not come to an end, and the Carnival King remains in place. The power that comes with being King is not proven contingent but transferable and winnable, and the catharsis that comes with abusing the Carnival King cannot occur. The myth of the Internet compensates; the ousting of Uber founder and CEO Travis Kalanick in 2017 passed up a high-profile figure in the Internet industry as a metaphorical sacrifice, a quasi-Carnival King. Kalanick had been at the centre of numerous scandals, including accusations of sexual harassment (Levin 2017), conflict with law enforcement over Uber's use of 'Greyball' technology<sup>123</sup> (Levine & Menn 2017), and on one memorable occasion, he was recorded verbally abusing one of his drivers (Newcomer 2017). Kalanick exists in the myth of the Internet as a spectacle of unabashed and unremorseful abuse of power, and his personal carnival was brought to an end. Over the last few years, there has also been a rising criticism against the power of people like Bezos and Zuckerberg; it is not unimaginable for these Carnival Kings to be pushed aside as antitrust lawsuits against prominent

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the film is based on Ben Mezrich's book *The Accidental Billionaires* (2009), and Saverin was a key source for Mezrich (Maslin 2009), complicating the lens through which the book, and thus the film, was written. Regardless of its veracity, *The Social Network* has been hailed as one of the best, if not the best, films of the 2010s (Fear et al. 2019; Nashawaty 2019).

<sup>123</sup> Greyball technology allowed Uber to block the locations of its drivers from law enforcement, enabling them to operate in cities where they had not been given permission to run their service.

Internet companies build momentum (Paul 2020; Wakabayashi 2020). Bezos has himself already chosen to step down from the day-to-day running of Amazon, passing the CEO crown to his lesser-known second-in-command Andy Jassy (Haselton 2021). It may just be that in the digital carnival, the Carnival King is on his way to the stocks.

The de-crowning of the Carnival King is an essential moment for carnival. It signals that carnival is coming to an end and that official life must return. As an alternative, carnival is necessarily temporary; if it is not temporary, it is not an alternative but a new official life. Bakhtin argues that it is “the very brevity of [carnival] freedom [that] increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism” (1965/1984, p. 89). Without an end, carnival becomes mundane, and another carnival is required to disempower it and restart the process of rebirth and renewal. The power of carnival is that it exposes official life as relative and contingent, reminding us that the social structures we live within are not essential or final. For Bakhtin, carnival proves that

*nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, [and] everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.* (1963/1984, p. 166, italics in original)

If it does not end, then carnival relinquishes its power and potential.

The temporality of the digital carnival remains a point of contention. As discussed above, some shifts suggest the Carnival King may be de-crowned, and the carnival ended, though these shifts must be considered within the broader context. Yes, Kalanick was removed from Uber; Uber, however, has not suffered from losing him, with revenue and the number of users continuing to climb<sup>124</sup> (Iqbal 2021). Bezos’ decision to step away from Amazon similarly will not majorly affect the power he wields; he will move from being the CEO to be the executive chairman

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<sup>124</sup> There was notable drop-off of both revenue and user numbers during 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related lock downs (Iqbal 2021). Uber has also never returned a profit, though neither has its main competitor Lyft (Trefis Team 2019).

of Amazon's board (Haselton 2021). Threats made by the United States government that they will reign in the dominant Internet companies are also largely hollow; and, as noted, when the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) handed Facebook a \$5 billion USD fine in 2019 for privacy violations – the largest fine they had ever given – Facebook saw its stock price *rise* (Kang 2019; Patel 2019). “Here's another way to say it,” Nilay Patel (2019) observed at the time, “the biggest FTC fine in United States history increased Mark Zuckerberg's net worth.” There is no real indication that the digital Carnival Kings intend to abdicate, and there is no real indication that we want them to either. In their 2020 annual tech survey, *The Verge* found that 85 per cent of Americans would be disappointed if Google was to disappear, 81 per cent would be if Amazon were to disappear, and 55 per cent if Facebook were to (Newton 2020c). This is not necessarily about desiring a change in how these companies operate either, as 66 per cent of respondents were fine with Facebook owning Instagram and WhatsApp. We continue to spend our time hooked into the dominant companies; a Pew Research Center survey shows that over half of the large American user bases of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube access these sites daily (Auxier & Anderson 2021). Whilst growth in user numbers has largely come to a halt over the last two years, it remains that 69 per cent of American adults use Facebook and 81 per cent use YouTube, whilst 71 per cent of American young adults aged between 18 and 29 use Instagram (Auxier & Anderson 2021). We are not disconnecting or diversifying our Internet usage, so carnival never seems to end. The consequences of this break from the temporality of carnival are discussed later in the chapter; for now, however, it is important to remember how embedded we are within the digital world.

## Mirror, Mirror

The optimistic reading of carnival as a utopic alternative to everyday life is one way in which Bakhtin's analysis of carnival is understood. In this reading, carnival is an emancipatory event, an opportunity to flip life on its head and subvert traditional dominations. When placed

within Bakhtin's biography, carnival becomes a critique of Stalinism; the Medieval Church becomes a stand-in for the Stalinist regime, and the carnival that shows the contingency of the Church is also exposing the contingency of Stalinism. Bakhtin's construction of carnival is thus a space for imagining alternatives to the terrors of life in the Soviet Union. This is not the only way carnival has been interpreted, however. A darker understanding suggests that carnival is a tool used to contain dissent; carnival becomes a momentary freedom to placate the masses before returning to official repressive rule. This carnival becomes an explanation for the return of conservative social policies – the *Zhdanovshchina* – after the cultural leniency that was permitted during World War II, an acknowledgment that the freedoms of carnival will necessarily come to an end. The tight grip of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union never disappeared, only loosening so as to ensure momentum for the war effort.

Both the subversive and the oppressive carnival have their champions: Michael Holquist, for instance, declares that carnival is “not only *not* an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself” (in Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. xviii, emphasis added); while Terry Eagleton disagrees, arguing that carnival is “a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art” (1981, p. 148 emphasis in original). The myth of the Internet is typically portrayed as a subversive carnival, full of possibilities and potentials. However, those who are critical of the Internet are more likely to view it as an oppressive carnival, where those with power seek to distract us with shiny objects whilst they harvest our data and amass mountains of wealth. There are echoes of Antonio Gramsci (1985, 1988) in this reading, as carnival is imagined as a concession granted by the hegemonic group to the masses so as to secure the masses' continuing consent to their own domination. To consider carnival as a hegemonic tool is to render it ineffectual as a subversive tool, as it is granted rather than taken. This darker understanding of carnival problematizes the communality, familiarisation, profanation, and metamorphosis that characterise carnival; in an

oppressive carnival, there is never truly an equal relationship between all people in the society, as its rules and limits are dictated by those who retain their official power.

Despite Bakhtin himself never explicitly discussing this possible interpretation of carnival, it cannot have been unknown to him. A contemporary of Bakhtin's, Anatoly Lunacharsky, put forward the idea of carnival as a safety valve used to control the masses as early as 1931. Lunacharsky had given a presentation on satire and carnival at the Academy of Sciences in 1931, and this speech was subsequently published in a leading Soviet literary journal, *Literaturnyj Kritik*, in 1935. Bakhtin would have been aware of Lunacharsky's comments, as Lunacharsky wrote a favourable review of the original Dostoevsky book and played a part in getting Bakhtin's 1929 sentence reduced from a prison labour camp to exile (Clark & Holquist 1984). Lunacharsky had also held a prominent ministerial position as the Minister for Enlightenment during the early Soviet period, making it yet more unlikely that Bakhtin was unaware of his work<sup>125</sup>. Despite this, Lunacharsky is not referenced in Bakhtin's discussion of carnival; he is briefly mentioned in relation to Dostoevsky and polyphony in the revised Dostoevsky book, but not mentioned in the Rabelais book (Booker & Juraga 1995; Branham 2019). It is likely, however, as Holquist (1982) claims, that Bakhtin's writings on carnival were a response to Lunacharsky's and that Bakhtin sought to prove that carnival is not simply one thing – a tool of containment, as Lunacharsky had suggested – but a multitude of things, including an alternative to oppression.

It is possible to interpret Bakhtin's work as implicitly signalling the containment aspect of carnival that Lunacharsky spoke of. The critique is hidden in his work, necessarily so given the strict attention to patriotism that came with the third of Stalin's five-year plans. Bakhtin begins by

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<sup>125</sup> Booker and Juraga translate Lunacharsky's position from Russian as "Minister of Enlightenment" (1995, p. 6); in this position he was head of *Narkompros*, the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Fitzpatrick, 2002). Sheila Fitzpatrick (2002) notes that the full title of the Commissariat in Russian is *Narodnyi Komissariat Prosveshcheniya*, and that the word *prosveshchenie* can be translated as either enlightenment or education. Lunacharsky served in this position from 1917 until 1929 and the rise of Stalin, after which he served as the President of the Committee for Direction of Scholarly and Teaching Institutions and then the Director of the Institute of Art, Literature and Language until being appointed Ambassador to Spain in 1933, a position he died en route to (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

connecting the comic of carnival to the subversion of authority, although he then goes on to show how this claim to subversion can be co-opted for oppressive motives. In the Rabelais book, Bakhtin explains Rabelais' use of comic festive forms as a way to subvert the authority of the Medieval Church. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais uses the comic as a method of critique that goes unchallenged by the authority as it is not explicitly understood as critique; it is, as the saying goes, just a joke. As with carnival more generally, Bakhtin claims that this use of the comic is not unique to literature, that for "thousands of years", people have been using the comic to "express their criticism, their deep distrust of official truth, and their highest hopes and aspirations" (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 269). Comic festive forms act as a type of shield, protecting those who would make the critique through the rejection of seriousness. Bakhtin then explains that this tactic was used by Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century to regain control of a nobility that had begun to desire more power. Ivan turned on the boyars – the Russian noblemen – and constructed a narrative wherein they were power-hungry and treasonous; they became the official power that Ivan sought to challenge using the carnivalesque:

While not breaking with the tradition of church bells, Ivan could not do without the jingle of the fools' bells; even the outward attributes of the *opritchina* had some carnival elements, for instance, the broom. The *opritchniks*' inner way of life and the banquets in the *Alexandrovskaya Sloboda* had a distinct grotesque aspect, as well as an extraterritorial character, similar to the freedom of the marketplace. Later, during its period of stabilization, the *opritchina* was suppressed and disavowed, and an attack was made on its very spirit, hostile to stabilization. (1965/1984, p. 270)

Ivan had decamped to *Alexandrovskaya Sloboda*, a settlement north-east of Moscow, for three months in 1564 - 1565 (Perrie & Pavlov 2003). Having fled the capital, Ivan declared that he was abdicating the Russian throne, citing treasonous boyars and Church officials as having driven him out. This caused public unrest, and, afraid of an uprising against them, the boyars and the Church eventually sent delegates to meet with Ivan to convince him to return. He agreed to do so on the

condition that he be allowed to form his own anti-corruption troop: the *oprichina*. This troop enabled Ivan to suppress his political opponents without resistance and to have absolute control over the types and breadth of punishments inflicted upon those who fell out of his favour (Perrie & Pavlov 2003). In this passage, Bakhtin emphasises the temporary, carnivalesque nature of the *oprichina*, showing that Ivan's temporary decampment to *Alexandrovskaia Sloboda*, whilst seeming like a child throwing his toys, was actually a manipulative ploy to effect a change in the hierarchical structure of Tsarist Russia. The carnivalesque force of the *oprichina* allowed Ivan to become the victim of official violence rather than the cause of it; when the official violence was disempowered, the carnival could come to an end. Bakhtin claims that the *oprichina* were not necessarily considered a threat by the general public; their carnivalesque nature amplified the idea that the *oprichina*, and thus Ivan himself, were positioned against the boyars and therefore alongside the peasantry. The carnival suppressed the nobility, leaving Ivan to stabilise his power. Through this commentary, Bakhtin shows an awareness of how carnival can be used as a tool for containing dissent by the ruling hegemony.

This darker understanding of carnival has concerning implications for carnival practices. For instance, in the subversive carnival, the Carnival King exists as a mockery of the official King and exposes the contingency of official rule. In the oppressive carnival, however, the Carnival King is an instance of those who have low social status in official life taking out their frustrations on someone whose social status in official life is even lower. As the Carnival King is the inverse of the official King, it is the lowliest person in the society who is crowned and, ultimately, brutally de-crowned. Whilst it may have been a King taking the metaphorical beating, it was still the slave being physically beaten. The Carnival King becomes a way for people to let off steam without actually threatening the hegemony of official life. As Ingvild Gilhus (1997, p. 93) has claimed, "The path from carnival to revolution was almost impassable when the impetus to revolt was drowned in feasting and merriment."

The temporary nature of carnival similarly becomes more sinister in the oppressive carnival. What is presented as freedom and a chance to explore alternative ways of living becomes controlled and bounded, never capable of existing outside of that moment. The emancipatory potential of carnival is dampened, shifting carnival from revolution to entertainment and spectacle, a type of supervised playtime that must come to an end. The looming return of the official hangs over carnival, almost a threat; carnival laughter takes on a hint of panic and anxiety, a resignation that knows it is mostly powerless to enact change and so laughs at its own impotence. The official gains more power through this oppressive carnival, as participants are reminded that no matter what they do, the official will return.

This oppressive carnival is the carnival of Internet critique. The Internet becomes, as Ivan the Terrible, an imagined victim seeking to reclaim its power. This occurs after the Dot Com Crash and 9/11; their growing social and economic power pulled from under them, the technological geniuses turn themselves into the alternative, a global community at a time when geopolitical tensions were high. They offered freedom and connection, and when the Global Financial Crisis hit in 2008, a new direction for the economy. The non-digital is made a scapegoat for society's issues. We are given the ability to remake ourselves and connect with people from across the globe to distract us from the terrors of digital capitalism; endless scrolling and auto-play videos are built to maintain our focus and keep us submerged in a sea of content.

This understanding raises questions about who takes on the role of the Carnival King. The Internet elite is no longer the counter-hegemony, but the hegemony, and therefore are identified as the official King. We must then consider that we, the users, are the Carnival King. We do not have the wealth or influence of the Internet elite, and the majority of us do not live in the same social world as the Internet elite. We are their opposites: they, the geniuses; us, the fools. Should carnival come to an end, it is us that will suffer, in much the same way that it was homeowners who suffered the 2008 Global Financial Crisis whilst the banks and investors were bailed out by



governments. It is understandable, then, that we do not seem to want the carnival to end. In the digital carnival, we have power that we do not have in official life. The Internet provides us with possibilities and potentials, and we cling to these even if we know that they are in some ways hollow and unachievable, as it is better than returning to a mundane existence.

Like Ivan the Terrible, the Internet elite paints themselves as the victims. Government agencies become the boyars, trying to overthrow them for nefarious purposes. Should the boyars win, we are told, our lives would be worse. The Internet elite should thus be permitted their *oprichina*, their platforms and algorithms, and like the Russian peasantry, we are encouraged to believe that the technological geniuses and their creations are on our side. This is the terror of the digital carnival, a carnival in which we are told that we have power and that the Internet elite wants what is best for us so that we continue to position ourselves against those that would wish to do them harm.

## Perpetual Carnival

The subversive and oppressive understandings of carnival work as interesting and competing lenses through which the myth of the Internet can be read. They explain, respectively, that the technological genius and the Internet company are a shining beacon of what the world could be, capable of undermining and subverting the status quo, and that the technological genius and the Internet company exist as a manipulative, capitalistic hegemon only interested in growing their own wealth and containing the masses by quashing any dissent. What Bakhtin's work suggests, however, is that we do not settle for deciding on one explanation or another. Instead, we should engage in a process of dialogism, where the subversive and oppressive carnivals are placed in conversation not as opposing ideas but as negotiable ideas. This approach sets aside moral judgments on who is right and who is wrong, what is good and what is evil, and instead considers the way power is at once something that is done to us, and something that is done by us.

The argument for carnival as subversion rests upon the premise that subversion is a radical, revolutionary change to the social status quo. The dialogic, negotiative carnival suggests that social change can be more subtle. Theodore Levinwand argues that

it is a thorough falsification of historical processes to argue that subversion offers the only alternative to the status quo. And it is a comparable falsification to argue that anything short of authentic subversion is but another instance of discipline. (1990, p. 479)

Here Levinwand speaks to arguments that claim any act of subversion remains contained within normative social structures as it cannot exist without that containment; subversion and containment become two sides of the same coin, so to speak, and those in power often pre-empt subversion by creating it themselves so as to ensure it can be controlled. This is what the oppressive carnival does, allowing the opportunity for subversion whilst remaining in control at all times.

However, Levinwand and James Dollimore argue that even this controlled and directed subversion can affect social change. Dollimore argues that the creation of a controlled subversion necessarily “generate[s] an instability which can be its undoing” (1994, p. 14); the very possibility of subversion is enough to destabilise the monologic power as it exposes itself as “historically contingent and partial” (1994, p. 15). In this case, the subversion does not have to be radical to have an effect as it inherently undermines the teleology of monologic power. Levinwand suggests then that we “need to be sensitive to the ongoing process of negotiation” (1990, p. 480) that determines how much social change the process of subversion allows. By creating a subversive event so as to contain the discontent of the masses – as occurs with carnival – the official power opens the door to a potential alternative; the return to the status quo depends upon the negotiation of how far the masses get through that door. If they are not appeased, there is the potential that the masses will rush the door, hindering any chance of holding them back. Levinwand and Dollimore seek to restore agency and autonomy to the masses by arguing that they have a say in the social order; it is not as simple, they argue, as saying that the masses permit their own

domination because they receive concessions, but that they permit the hegemonic order to occur on their own terms. The official power creates its own weakness by permitting a subversive event such as carnival; it is forced into negotiation because it has shown the masses that the status quo “did not, and still does not, have to be so” (Dollimore 1994, p. 15).

To consider the digital carnival as a negotiative carnival is to acknowledge that control does not rest solely with the technological elite. The subversive potential that is promised to users in the myth of the Internet becomes a point of tension; they promise us freedom but have yet to deliver. Using the myth of the Internet, they seek to keep us suspended in this carnival state, with freedom always just out of reach. When technology improves, they tell us, we will have freedom. When artificial intelligence dictates the flow of information across the network, we will have freedom. When we have used up all the resources of the network, we will have freedom. The myth, however, has evolved. In its fourth stage, it enters the realm of parody. We know that the promises are empty, yet instead of rejecting them, we lean into them. Everything within the carnival is exaggerated; the self that the myth of the Internet allows us to improve is deified, our only point of reference for life within the digital world.

On the one hand, this is what the technological elite want. As we continue the revelry of carnival, we continue to create data from which they can harvest and profit. It also has unintended consequences, however. Our demand that the subversive promises are kept becomes louder and more extreme. The temporality that is denied to the digital carnival begins to create an existential crisis. We cannot move forward and are constantly kept in a state where we are forced to continuously, often many times a day, construct, deconstruct, and re-construct the self. This is the threat of permanent liminality that Árpád Szakolczai (2017, p. 234) discusses:

‘permanent liminality’ brings a disaster to all parties involved; it consumes their forces, persisting until their resources are exhausted, leaving nothing but devastation through escalating mimetic crises. Nobody can really win, as change has become so much accelerated and taken for granted that any effort to tie it

down to something stable and accommodating becomes impossible; indeed, most participants of the situation have long forgotten even the idea of how it was when things were ‘stable’ and ‘normal.’ This situation produces a sense of entrapment, resulting in an emotional overheat, eventually leading to a burnout.

This, it turns out, problematizes things. The technological elite loses the ability to control the narrative. They become the Carnival King, but not in a way that is beneficial for them; instead of the heroes, they become the fools, and we hold them up as Bakhtin’s carnival participants held up their Carnival King, enthusiastically in anticipation of their eventual beating. This is the *schadenfreude* that characterised the 2021 United States congressional hearing on the role that Facebook, Google, and Twitter played in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection at the Capitol; Zuckerberg, Pichai, and Dorsey were forced to answer yes or no questions from congress members, unable to add any nuance to their answers, creating a series of soundbites that were designed to allow for self-congratulatory ‘gotcha’ moments for Congress. As technology reporter Casey Newton (2021a) observed, “members filibustered with their usual bad-faith, made-for-tweeting criticisms (‘explain this one bad post’); trumped-up (in both senses of the word) complaints of censorship; and dire warnings that regulation was coming ... someday.” Congress members openly mocked Zuckerberg, Pichai, and Dorsey, with Republican representative Billy Long using his allotted time to put forward this useful question: “I’m going to ask you a yes-or-no question. Do you know the difference between these two words: ‘yes’ and ‘no?’” (quoted in Robertson 2021). There was no indication that congress members wanted anything more from the hearing other than to gleefully put the CEOs on the spot and score political points by supposedly coming down hard on them. They were eager to abuse the Carnival Kings and even more eager for us to witness them doing so.

Yet by existing as carnival participants themselves, although without realising they are, Congress members are rendered incapable of affecting meaningful change. They too participate in the carnival laughter, “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding” (Bakhtin

1965/1984, pp. 11 - 12). Carnival laughter is intended to expose the relativity of terror, to transform “all that was frightening in ordinary life [...] into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 47); by mocking Zuckerberg, Pichai, and Dorsey, the congress members remove any reason to challenge the hegemony of the Internet elite as long as carnival continues. They are not something to be feared during carnival, and as carnival is seemingly permanent, there is no need to move against them radically any time soon. Every time Congress calls upon the Internet elite as leaders of the Internet industry, they re-crown the Internet elite as the Carnival Kings, continuing an unserious assault and allowing the massive hoarding of wealth to go largely unacknowledged.

Even though dragging the technological elite before committee hearings may have little impact on law and policy changes, it does serve to remind the masses of the contingency of the Internet elite’s power. This contingency is exploited; the Internet elite are proven incapable of controlling what occurs on their platforms as misinformation, violence, and crime continue to evade their moderation algorithms and personnel. Stuck in a perpetual present, the technological genius is unable to craft a remedy for this situation, trapped in a moment of chaos where they are continuously pulled before Congressional committees that both empower and disempower them. This cycle is no more pleasant for the users, as Szakolczai (2000, p. 213) suggests:

What happens [when] such a ritual becomes permanent; when individuals become stuck with their roles, which they must play from now onwards for the rest of their lives. Most evidently, the ‘play’ character of the ritual disappears. Individuals keep repeating the same roles, movements and gestures all over again which, after a time, becomes extremely boring. At the same time, playing will not just become a bore, but also deadly serious.

This, in turn, heightens feelings of anxiety, which leads to what Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 68) calls “schismogenesis,” a cyclic escalation of conflict which continually grows in intensity. This is a crucial way the digital carnival is different from Bakhtin’s carnival; schismogenesis places people in opposition to one another, creating a struggle within the singular carnival body. The carnival

body, without an end to the carnival, fractures, causing further existential anxiety for carnival participants. The myth of the Internet continues to allude to a universal humanity, whilst users become more and more polarised and fragmented. This, in turn, lengthens the carnival as the technological elite continue to declare their mission unfulfilled. We are trapped in this loop, trapped in an escalating spiral of violence and existential crisis. The digital carnival goes on.

## An Inconclusive Conclusion

"What makes this seem secure, whether or not it actually is?"

This question was written in Mark Zuckerberg's *Book of Change*, a 2006 journal used to plan Facebook's future (quoted in Levy 2020, p. 123). Whilst Zuckerberg kept numerous journals during Facebook's early years – he has since destroyed them all to prevent anything written in them being turned against him – *Book of Change* was written as Facebook made the transition from a closed network which required a university or high school email address to join, to an open network accessible to anyone. In it, Zuckerberg considered the privacy issues that would come with open access. He worked through questions of how profiles would be linked together and to whom different profiles would be visible; should an adult be allowed to view or connect to the profile of a high school student, for instance? However, the question above indicates that Zuckerberg was less interested in privacy than in the illusion of privacy.

If one were to ask this question of the internet in general, the myth of the Internet would be an answer. The myth of the Internet provides an illusion of security, stability, and control, where networking technology can be relied upon to usher in a better world. It encourages us to believe in the benevolence of technological geniuses and Internet companies. As I have argued in this thesis, however, the myth of the Internet has led us to an uneasy and seemingly unending present. The alternative world the myth presents is carnivalistic rather than salvational, and the security the myth presumes is undercut by the chaos and crisis of a perpetual carnival.

The illusionary security of digital immaterial capitalism continues to obscure the instability of the Internet. Tim Hwang (2020) argues that, should advertisers realise the extent of this instability, the economic model of the contemporary Internet would fall apart. He claims that advertising revenue is built upon a subprime attention crisis. Despite all the data that Internet companies harvest, they cannot guarantee any actual results for advertisers. Part of this, he says, is the rise of ad blocking software, and part of it is the oversaturation of digital advertising, making

ads all but invisible to users as they scroll. Whilst a lack of guaranteed results is endemic to all advertising, Hwang argues that the revenues Internet companies are gathering are particularly disproportionate to the services they can provide. To lose their advertising revenue would force companies such as Facebook and Google to reconsider radically the way they operate or whether they could keep operating at all. The reliance on advertising undercuts the imagined security of Internet companies; their apparent ability to weather economic crises is constructed on the fortunes they have amassed through advertising, and if they were to fail, there would be resounding consequences for the broader economy<sup>126</sup>.

The myth of the Internet denies its own instability and encourages us to believe that the Internet elite are in control. Reading the myth of the Internet through Bakhtin's carnival suggests that the Internet elite do not, in fact, have control. Their promises remain unfulfilled, and power has come to rest in the hands of users. This outcome would be regarded as a social positive if the ongoing carnival of the Internet did not cause existential anxiety, chaos, and schismogenesis. Instead, conflict escalates, and the laughter of carnival becomes hysterical.

It is difficult to imagine a way out of the perpetual carnival. It would mean sacrificing the Carnival King, who is either the Internet elite or the users. What would it mean to wrest control from either of these groups? It is increasingly looking like this is occurring in non-Western nations such as India, where so-called hostage-taking laws are being created so that the ruling party can control what is said on the Internet (Elliott 2021; Newton 2021b). These hostage-taking laws are where Internet companies are required to have a local point of contact; this provides an aggrieved

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<sup>126</sup> This is arguably one of the motivations behind Google's new FLoC tracking programme. FLoC – Federated Learning of Cohorts – is intended to replace the cookie tracking system currently dominating the ad tech industry (Bohn 2021). Cookie tracking enables advertisers to directly identify individual users and track them across the Internet, whereas FLoC assigns users to cohorts that can be tracked to provide a layer of anonymity. Google argues that this is a better option than the complete rejection of tracking that companies such as Apple are prioritising, as it holds back more insidious methods of tracking. In Google's favour, FLoC allows Google to continue providing targeted advertising services.



government with someone to leverage should a company not comply with their demands. These laws are authoritarian and pressure companies to censor content that users post to their platforms if it is not in line with the government's ideology. Should the demands become too antithetical to the myth of America and the values that American Internet companies hold, it would be unsurprising for such companies to remove themselves from certain countries. This encourages the splintering of the Internet, changing it from a global network into a series of provincial networks. The size of user bases would be affected, as would any potential growth companies hope to see in the future, which would affect investor confidence. This may lead to new companies emerging, as they have the possibility of growth whereas the larger companies have seemingly peaked. Alternatively, it may lead to the further entrenchment of existing companies as investors become less likely to take a risk on something new.

Is there another way past the carnival without fracturing the Internet? Perhaps, but it would likely involve a radical change in the current direction of Western politics. Strong regulation from the United States government would be necessary to curb the influence of the Internet elite. This would mean a change in tax laws. However, this seems unlikely given that ProPublica's report on the tax avoidance of the twenty-five wealthiest people in the United States was met with an Internal Revenue Service (IRS) investigation into how the tax records were leaked rather than any significant indication of changes to tax laws (Hansen 2021). President Biden has announced plans to raise the income tax rate of the wealthiest Americans (Book 2021), although as the ProPublica report shows, many of those in the wealthiest category do not earn income in the usual sense, instead using their assets as collateral to take out massive loans (Eisinger et al. 2021). This is the underbelly of the \$1 salary club, popularised by Steve Jobs in 1997: CEOs who can expect large salaries choose to instead take a nominal \$1 salary for their work, though this is frequently offset with company stocks (BBC 2016a; Eisinger et al. 2021). Many of the Internet elite have done this, including Mark Zuckerberg, Larry Page, and Larry Ellison. By taking such a low salary, income tax is non-existent, and, particularly in the Internet industry, stocks do not pay dividends, so they too

cannot be taxed (Eisinger et al. 2021). Biden has also announced extra funds for the IRS to enable them to have more diligence in tracing tax fraud. However, after the ProPublica report, Republicans have doubled down on their opposition to this plan, claiming that it would remove layers of privacy from individuals' tax records (Lorenzo 2021). The current state of United States politics leaves little possibility that meaningful changes to how the Internet elite dominate society can occur; Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell has gone so far as to say that "bipartisanship is over" (quoted in Carney 2021), inspiring no confidence in the government's ability to agree to effective regulations.

Attempting a non-commercial reimagining of the Internet is all but impossible. Nation-state governments do not have the resources or finances to fund a large scale network; as discussed in this thesis, one of the primary reasons for the Internet developing the way that it did was because of United States funding, which was enabled by the post-war economic boom. A lack of funding stopped Donald Davies in the United Kingdom from pursuing his ideas on packet-switching further in the 1960s. For a non-commercial network to be built, we would first have to break down decades of neoliberal ideologies and policies, a gargantuan task in itself. Second, users would need to be incentivised to move to a state network, even as commercial providers can provide cheaper and more attractive services. Third, governments would either need to rent internet infrastructure, create their own, or commandeer that which already exists, all problematic options: renting infrastructure would mean a quasi-public network, creating new infrastructure would be an enormous expense, and commandeering infrastructure is a dictatorial move.

Perhaps the only way to end the digital carnival is to end the Internet itself. This is something out of a post-apocalyptic dystopian film, where a power surge, terrorist attack, or cosmic event pulls the metaphorical plug. Technically, the carnival of the Internet would come to an end. However, the return to official life would be a regression tainted by the possibilities of global networking. In a romantic version of this future, we return to the land and each other, living out a life akin to a digital detox. In a more realistic version of this future, we come to realise just

how dependent on the Internet we have become. The world would be in chaos as financial systems disappear, fortunes and debts wiped from existence. Server farms that host the cloud would go dark. It would not be surprising if some countries understood it as an attack and retaliated; an attack from who, they would not be sure, but old enemies make good targets. Can we unwind society from the Internet without devastating consequences? Probably not.

When these are our potential futures, it is no wonder that the carnival goes on. Carnival, however, is negotiative. As Bakhtin suggests, we should not set up a dualism where it is one thing or the other. It is not a case of either having the Internet or not having the Internet, but a negotiation that recognises and acknowledges that it has both positive and negative effects on society. The carnival may continue, but we can question on whose terms it does so<sup>127</sup>. Do we continue to internalise the myth of the Internet, and with it the myth of America, or do we create a new myth? Can we create a carnival inside a carnival, periods where the existential anxiety of the everyday is set aside, and carnival laughter is joyous rather than hysterical? Where we profane the myth of the Internet and the myth of America? This is the potential of reading the Internet through Bakhtin's carnival, and the return to *poiēsis* that Heidegger imagined. The Bakhtinian carnival is ambiguous, and so we must be too.

The focus of this thesis has been on Internet companies that have been created in the United States and on the companies that form a dominant hegemony. Whilst I have argued that these companies shape our overall experience of the Internet, there remain companies that operate outside of this particular myth of the Internet. An examination of these other companies through the lens of carnival is a possible avenue of future research. This could include non-United States companies, such as TikTok from China, or companies that consciously buck the White American

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<sup>127</sup> This is a question being asked within a critical digital humanities (see for instance Smithies 2017).

capitalist focus, such as Ameelio (<<https://ameelio.org/#/>> [viewed 16/06/2021]), a not-for-profit organisation that allows users to easily send letters to prison inmates within the United States for free<sup>128</sup>. These companies may represent a carnival within the myth of the Internet, an alternative to the dominant narrative.

The lens of carnival could also be applied to how the internet operates in non-western countries. This might include examining China's heavily censored internet or the increasingly authoritarian controls being applied in places such as India. Where are the negotiative carnival spaces in these restricted networks, if there are any? How is the internet in these places used as a tool of oppression and a tool of subversion? These are questions beyond the scope of this thesis and beyond my current capacities as a researcher.

The current scrutiny the Internet elite are facing may change how the Internet can operate in the future. United States politicians on both sides of the aisle seemingly want a reckoning to be brought to Silicon Valley, even if the hearings that have been held thus far have been largely farcical. Law and policy changes have the potential to disrupt the digital carnival, though whether they are able to dismantle the myth of the Internet remains to be seen. The myth of the Internet may be forced to evolve in the coming years as politicians battle for ideological supremacy and fight over the meaning of the myth of America.

Another potential avenue for future research is a more empirical study of how users understand the Internet. This thesis has focused on the understandings put forward by the Internet elite and those that support the myth of the Internet; there is room for qualitative examinations of a broad cross-section of individual experiences of the Internet. How, exactly, do the consequences

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<sup>128</sup> Ameelio was founded by Uzoma Orchingwa, an American son of Nigerian immigrants, and Gabriel Saruhashi, a Japanese Brazilian. They created their organisation in response to the high costs families bore when contacting incarcerated family members. Through the Ameelio website, individuals can write letters and upload photos, which are then printed and mailed to inmates on their behalf. This is a free service and removes the difficulty of having to find the correct mailing address for an inmate. The organisation is funded through donations and by offering a paid-for mail service for criminal justice organisations and lawyers.

of a perpetual digital carnival manifest? Are users able to articulate the existential anxiety that Szakolczai (2017) indicates, or is it, as David Foster Wallace identifies, that "the most obvious, most ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about"<sup>129</sup> (2009, p. 8)? The user experience of the myth of the Internet and the digital carnival offers a fascinating narrative that can then be placed in conversation with the hegemonic narrative. It is in this conversation between users and the Internet elite that carnival can be negotiated and that alternatives can emerge.

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<sup>129</sup> Wallace explained this with a joke: "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'" (2009, pp. 3 – 4).

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